

COOKING WITH WILD GAME

VOLUME
14

Author: **EDA**

Illust: **Kochimo**





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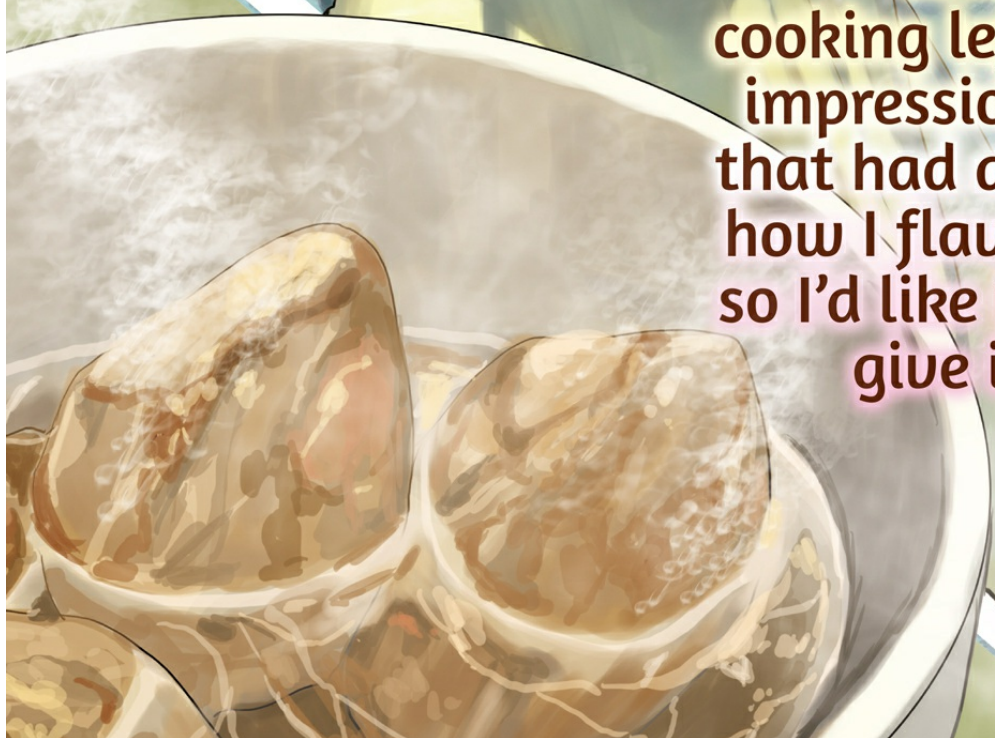


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“Your unusual cooking left a deep, deep impression on me! And that had a big impact on how I flavored this dish, so I’d like it if you would give it a taste.”



Toor Deen

A young girl who once belonged to a Suun branch house, but is now a member of the Deen. Remarkably skilled at manning the stove, she has started helping Asuta run his stalls.

Mikel

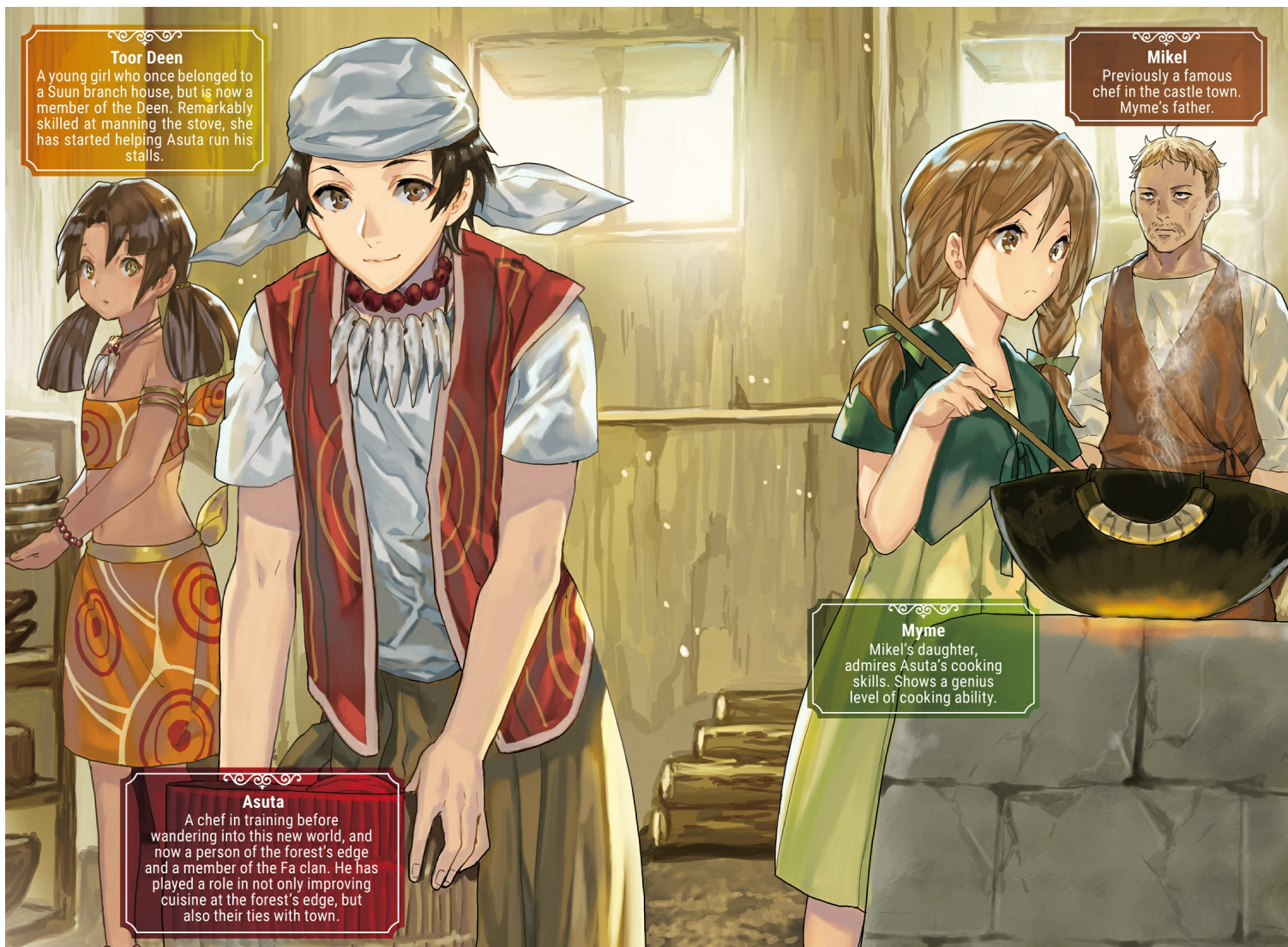
Previously a famous chef in the castle town. Myme's father.

Myme

Mikel's daughter, admires Asuta's cooking skills. Shows a genius level of cooking ability.

Asuta

A chef in training before wandering into this new world, and now a person of the forest's edge and a member of the Fa clan. He has played a role in not only improving cuisine at the forest's edge, but also their ties with town.



“Come on, it’s not like we can sprint ahead with getting married without even asking for permission from our clan heads.”

“That’s true... In that case, how about indulging purely in pleasure while taking care not to make any kids...?”



MENU

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Prologue: Crimson Memories

I found myself in the midst of a scorching crimson heat.

My whole body was hot, and my vision was dyed a deep red. It was a world dominated by that heat and blazing color, to the point that it was like I myself had become a flame.

It was hot.

Hellishly, terribly hot.

That was just about the only thing I could think at the moment.

I couldn't move my body at all, nor could I make a sound. It was frankly a mystery how I had managed to keep my sanity at all in this hell.

Actually, was I even still sane?

To start with, who was I?

Any human thoughts and emotions had long since melted away, leaving behind a pointless existence that only suffered in agony from the heat of this crimson world.

And in all that, only one sensation remained.

My right hand, or at least that's what I thought it was, was gripping a thin bit of firm wood.

That sensation was the only thing still tethering me to my sense of self. When it was gone, I'd surely burn up and disappear from this world completely.

This is my old man's kitchen knife.

Even that thought felt like it would soon scatter and disperse. And yet, in this agonizing hell, I kept clinging to it desperately.

Those bastards must have set fire to my house... And even though Reina tried to stop me, I ignored her and leapt into the inferno to get my old man's kitchen knife, since it's more important to him than life itself...

Was that how I had ended up in this agony?

There was no way I would be saved after leaping into that sea of flames, so why had I gone and done something like that...? At present, my memories were vague and hazy.

What it came down to is, I had lost control and run into the restaurant filled with red flame and black smoke.

Instantly, my limbs had caught fire and the awful scent of burning clothing and skin filled my nose.

But above even that, the black smoke had overwhelmed everything and left me wandering in a haze as it filled my lungs.

My consciousness had started to fade from the lack of oxygen.

But despite all that, I'd managed to grab hold of the kitchen knife, which miraculously hadn't burned up. And then my memory cut off until I found myself in my current predicament.

I couldn't breathe, and my whole body was burning. Time seemed to freeze, trapping me in that one moment, with all the pain it held.

Is this my punishment? I was a huge idiot and threw away my life. My old man and Reina will be devastated...so is this how I pay for it?

It's not like I wanted to cause them to suffer, though.

My body had practically moved on its own, without me even thinking. It was as if something was leading it...and my head was filled with the certainty that there was no other way forward.

Still, even this hell was sure to eventually come to an end. I knew I remembered the building collapsing and crushing my body.

No matter how much I struggled and clung to my old man's kitchen knife, eventually I would disappear. After living for just seventeen years only to make a colossal idiotic mistake right at the end, I'd scatter and disperse into nothingness.

And if I couldn't bear to let this be the end of me...then I had no choice but to leap into that light.

Light...?

Suddenly, I noticed a fleeting golden light flickering beyond the raging crimson.

It was a pale, thin, dim light amidst the roaring flames, and seemed like it would disappear if you touched it.

As if being guided by something, I crawled toward that light.

I sought that frail warm light as I clutched my old man's kitchen knife, not even having the leeway needed to so much as doubt if it really existed or if I should be approaching it.

And then...

I was somewhat violently pulled back into my current life.



"Snap out of it! Open your eyes, Asuta!" Ai Fa shouted as she clung to my shoulders and shook me.

The world had regained its usual colors, but my sight was soon filled with the sight of a beautiful slender face.

"I'm fine... It's nothing..." I forced out in a hoarse voice that sounded as if it belonged to someone else.

At that, Ai Fa drew in close as her blue eyes shot me a glare.

"What do you mean you're 'fine'?! Whatever, just drink this!" she retorted, thrusting a ladle at my face. The cool water poured into my mouth so quickly that it felt like I was going to drown. However, that was enough to finally get me good and fully awake. After drinking my fill, I placed my left hand on the floor and somehow managed to raise my heavy body.

"I seriously am fine... I just had a bit of a bad dream. It's nothing to worry about."

"You're really all right?"

Ai Fa cupped my cheeks and brought her face real close to my nose. As I looked back into her blue eyes, I repeated, "I'm fine."

With a small sigh, she let go of my face.

And then, she gently placed her arms around me as if she were handling something fragile.

“Don’t go worrying me like that... It was as if you were suffering from some sort of affliction.”

“Sorry. Was I making noise?”

“You were doing more than just that. Your sweat-drenched body was twisting all about while you deliriously mumbled over and over about how hot it was.”

I could feel the gentle warmth of Ai Fa’s body from where she touched me. And that warmth was enough to wipe out the last lingering remnants of the nightmare.

The sweet aroma from Ai Fa’s hair was wafting in through my nostrils. Around half of my vision was filled with those golden locks, while the rest took in the dimly-lit interior of the Fa house.

I had only had a dull sensation in my limbs, but now they were filling with strength.

Yes, I was fine now.

As long as Ai Fa was there with me, I could keep on living without falling prey to despair.

“To be honest, I was dreaming of when I lost my life in my previous world...”

Ai Fa didn’t reply, instead simply further tightening her arms around me.

“It made me realize again, I really did die once... Well, not that anyone would ever believe me.”

“The past doesn’t matter in the least. You’re living here at the forest’s edge as a member of the Fa clan now, Asuta.”

“Right. And I realized again just how precious that fact is too,” I replied, patting Ai Fa’s head.

Like a peevish child, she ground her forehead up against mine.

And as I accepted that joyful pain, I thought about how I would never make

such a mistake again.

Until the day that this life came to an end, I would keep on living in a way that wouldn't leave me with regrets.

I'd live with everything I had for my own sake and the sake of those close to me, never forgetting the pain caused by that awful mistake that could never be taken back.

As I reflected on those thoughts, I stroked Ai Fa's silky hair.

"Well then, I guess let's get started on this morning's work. The next ten days are going to be hectic, after all."

Ai Fa just sat there silently, staring.

"Hmm? What's the matter?"

"There isn't any sunlight streaming in through the windows," Ai Fa replied, strengthening her hug. "We start working at the break of dawn. That is the custom at the forest's edge, and the Fa clan is no exception."

"Y-Yeah, but there's already dim light coming in, so the sun may be shining outside the house."

"However, that light has yet to reach the inside," Ai Fa retorted, now hugging me so tight that I could swear my ribs were creaking.

Chapter 1: A New Encounter

1

It was now the nineteenth of the black month.

Business was once again resuming today after the break we took every ten days.

Putting it all together, this was my eleventh round of contracts with the stalls. In other words, we had already run them for a hundred days by this point.

Naturally, we had to insert some breaks in those contracts for various reasons, and sometimes we didn't open up shop for as long as half a month or more. If you counted from the first day we ran our stall, then we would be at the four month anniversary in around a week or so.

It had been roughly five months now since I had come to live as a member of the Fa clan. And it had been about a month and a half since the fifth of the ashen month, when we were finally able to return to the Fa house after our conflict with that criminal noble of Genos, Cyclaeus, was settled. Over the course of that month and a half, a great deal had changed all around us.

First off, the criminals had been dealt with.

Cyclaeus and his younger brother Ciluel had been judged in accordance with the laws of Genos. Their trial had taken ten days, and ultimately the lord of Genos, Marstein, had more or less kept his promises.

Cyclaeus was given a sentence of life confinement, while Ciluel was given twenty years of penal servitude. I had been told that nobles weren't given any sentences harsher than death, but this time was seen as a special exception. After all, Ciluel had gone into a frenzy again at the trial and shouted curses at not only the legal officers of Genos but even the western god Selva, which had only added to his crimes.

Zuuro Suun was also sentenced to ten years of penal servitude.

Apparently a sentence of penal servitude meant being thrown into an especially dangerous area, like a mine or something like that, and worked even more harshly than slaves. On top of that, nobody knew where it was carried out. To guard against the off chance of someone plotting to rescue such criminals, they were first escorted to the capital of Selva, after which they were stripped of all rank and status and then assigned to their workplaces.

No one had ever lived through ten years of penal servitude, but if Zuuro Suun managed to become the first, he could once again return to the settlement at the forest's edge. But we wouldn't know if such a thing were possible until those ten years had passed.

And once everyone else's sentences were handed down, Bartha of Masara was granted her freedom. Marstein had managed to keep his promise on that point too.

Still, that measure was taken not just on behalf of the people of the forest's edge, but also to placate the townsfolk. In short, while revealing that the crimes pinned on the Red Beards were actually the work of Zattsu Suun and his men, who were prompted by Cyclaeus and Ciluel, they also pardoned Bartha as a remnant of that group.

While it didn't really make significant waves where I could see, the vindication of the Red Beards apparently resulted in quite a commotion elsewhere in the post town and in other towns. After all, the Red Beards from back then had been seen as heroes by the townsfolk.

Those Red Beards were then framed for taking the lives of others, and the number of people who felt appalled by that fact was pretty large. In order to clear those doubts, Duke Marstein Genos pardoned Bartha, surely in an attempt to lessen the dissatisfaction and animosity toward the ruling class of Genos at least a little.

At any rate though, the honor of the Red Beards had been salvaged.

"That lord of Genos sure can turn everything to his benefit, huh?" the bodyguard Kamyua Yoshu had remarked after Bartha was set free. As one of the key players in settling the whole commotion, he wore a rather amused smile, looking deeply satisfied with how things had played out.

After waiting for Cyclaeus and Ciluel's sentences to be passed down, Kamyua Yoshu departed for Banarm with Welhide. He must have found a new job there like he said he would, as I hadn't seen him at all for the past month. And this time around he had taken Leito with him and said they would wander around the western territory for several months, which I guess meant he was ultimately returning to the lifestyle of a wanderer.

And then, there was us.

Our business had undergone quite a bit of change too. In fact, it had gone through so much of an upheaval that it was hard to say where to even start explaining.

The first matter we ended up having a debate over was the price of giba meat.

Back when we were still waiting for the trial to begin, Polarth sought out a meeting with me and people from the post town I had ties to, acting as Marstein's proxy.

"Asuta, you plan to reopen your stalls once those criminals of the Winds of Black Death are captured, correct? There is a small concern I would like to have you consider beforehand."

Normally, it would be the ducal guard captain Melfried's duty to act as Marstein's proxy when negotiating with the people of the forest's edge. But considering what the matter at hand entailed, Polarth had been selected as the one most well versed with our business.

The meeting's location ended up being The Kimyuus's Tail, while the owners of The Sledgehammer and The Great Southern Tree, Nail and Naudis respectively, were invited to attend. That was because this issue was of interest to them too.

"To get straight to the point, we would like to have you reevaluate the price of giba meat."

At that time, we were selling giba meat for the same price as karon leg meat. That went for both the fresh meat sold to the inns and the meals we sold at the stalls. And what we were being told was that such pricing was a problem.

“Giba meat is every bit as tasty as karon torso meat, is it not? So it is a bit of an issue to have it sold at roughly the same price as karon leg meat and skinless kimyuus meat.”

“So you’re saying karon and kimyuus meat will stop selling if our prices stay the same?”

“Yes, that is correct. At least skinless kimyuus meat is still cheaper than giba, but karon leg meat is essentially the same price. Karon leg meat is sinewy and lacking in fat, so it simply has no chance of winning against fatty delicious giba meat when they are priced the same, wouldn’t you say?”

On top of that, the karon meat in Genos was purchased from the town of Dabagg. Genos sold Dabagg vegetables and fruit wine, while Dabagg sold Genos karon meat. It would apparently be quite inconvenient for both towns if the balance of that exchange were to break down. And then Banarm was entangled in everything, as another town known for its fuwano and mamaria fruit wine.

“If karon leg meat were to stop selling entirely in Genos, Dabagg may choose to instead strengthen ties with Banarm. And if that were to happen, the Turan lands would lose a significant business partner for their fuwano and fruit wine. At that point, even such a hard worker as Sir Torst would likely be thoroughly toppled.”

Torst was the man ordered to put the house of Turan back on its feet after Cyclaeus’s downfall. Currently, all rights Lefreya had as head of the house were denied to her, and Torst was the one actually in command.

“Additionally, you have faced occasional complaints not only from meat sellers, but also others running stalls in the post town. They say there is no way they can possibly compete with such delicious food being sold for so cheap. Of course, to some degree that simply comes down to a matter of free competition. However, since you people of the forest’s edge wish to forge proper bonds with the townsfolk, is it not undesirable to earn such animosity?”

“That’s certainly true, but still...”

“There is one further concern as well. At this rate, it may end up that only a sharply limited amount of giba meat circulates through the post town.”

“Huh? Why’s that?”

“You see, if giba meat is available so cheaply, then the residents of the castle town shall likely end up rushing to snatch it all up,” Polarth said with a limp grin. “At the previous dinner party, Duke Marstein Genos himself recognized the deliciousness of giba meat, did he not? That has made the topic a matter of great interest to the people of the castle town. For the time being, the desire to avoid giba as a symbol of calamity has not yet been wiped away, but as soon as even a single person takes that step forward there will surely be no stopping it. And if they can have meat just as delicious as karon torso for cheap, the affluent citizens of the castle town may well begin seeking nothing else. Were that to occur, it truly could cause a catastrophic collapse in our relations with Dabagg.”

“Ah, so that’s what you meant...”

“And to reveal some matters from our end, Sir Leeheim of Count Saturas’s house has begun seriously considering purchasing giba meat. Having learned of that, Duke Genos dispatched me in order to avoid future turmoil,” Polarth explained, remaining perfectly cheerful throughout. “If I did not have such ties to the people of the forest’s edge, I would likely have thought similarly to Sir Leeheim. In fact, I may well have even considered buying up all of the cheap giba meat in order to turn around and resell it in the castle town. That would steal away any chance whatsoever to eat giba meat in the post town.”

“B-But we’re the ones who decide who we sell the giba meat to, right?”

“Yes, of course. But currently, these two here are the only ones purchasing giba meat, correct? Would there be any justifiable reason for the people of the forest’s edge to deny legitimate requests from citizens of the castle town who have acknowledged the deliciousness of giba meat when the people of the post town are hesitating to make such purchases? Unless, that is, you decide on a policy of not doing business with nobles at all. But how truly sad that would be, don’t you think?”

“Well, that may all be true, but still...”

“Perhaps that is also due to free competition. However, I cannot imagine the people of the forest’s edge wishing for such a result. And it was such thinking that led to Duke Genos making the current proposal I bring to you. If giba meat

were not so incredibly cheap, then even the nobles of the castle town who would be so crude as to monopolize it for resale could not afford to.”

Whether it was done by the nobles of the castle town or the folks from the post town, such a huge purchase of giba meat would bring a great deal of fortune to the people of the forest’s edge, allowing them to live more comfortable lifestyles.

But if the giba meat was all purchased for cheap to be resold and the people of the post town were no longer able to eat any, naturally that would feel like a somehow twisted state of affairs. I wanted the folks I knew from the post town to be able to eat giba meat more than some complete and utter strangers from the castle town. Maybe that was nothing more than my own personal sentiment, but it was still something I didn’t quite feel comfortable with.

On top of this, it wasn’t as if the people of the forest’s edge had come to a consensus on the matter of selling giba meat. People like Gulaf Zaza and the Beim clan head were still watching the actions of the Fa and Ruu carefully to determine if such an idea was proper and would lead to a bright future for the forest’s edge. At any rate, I certainly figured the idea of neglecting the folks from the post town to earn favor with the nobles would clash with the nature of the people of the forest’s edge.

“Additionally, as you gentlemen from the inns are aware, there are heavy restrictions placed on the raising and sale of kimyuus in Genos, out of consideration toward Dabagg. Even if the castle were to dispatch an order for more, at present that could only be answered through the Daleim plantations and a portion of the castle town. Besides, has it not been decided that kimyuus dishes must be sold for cheaper than karon?”

“Yes. Inns and stalls earn more profit selling karon dishes than kimyuus, which is how those prices were decided,” Naudis replied despite the fact that he was dealing with the noble for the first time, though his nerves were definitely showing in his voice. “But when it comes to giba? The price of giba meat changed based on cut to begin with, and currently the chest and back meat costs more than karon leg meat. Furthermore, the dishes purchased from Asuta add his profit margin on top, so it’s more expensive than karon cooking.”

“Right. Karon dishes are four red coins, while giba dishes cost five, was it? But it should still certainly be far more economical than using karon torso meat,” Polarth said with an easygoing chuckle.

This time, it was the expressionless Nail who responded.

“It certainly is true that dishes made using giba meat have been overwhelmingly more popular. I have had the thought that I would end up not needing to even purchase karon or kimyuus at this rate, so it’s not as if I can’t understand Duke Genos’s concerns... But even so, if the prices rise too greatly, it will no longer be possible to sell giba cooking in the post town.”

“Naturally, I’m not telling you to suddenly raise it to the same price as karon torso. I simply would like you to reappraise the price slightly in order to appease the meat sellers of Dabagg and others selling their cooking. If you do so and continue selling Sir Asuta’s cooking and giba meat, no one should have any complaints. And if you will allow me to interject my personal opinion, I cannot imagine Sir Asuta’s cooking failing to sell from just a slight increase in price. After all, it is simply delicious!”

“Ah...I’m honored to receive such a compliment.”

“And if you do happen to have customers complain, you can simply openly reveal what we are now discussing. Inform them that you were forced to raise prices in order to prevent the nobles from monopolizing the giba meat. I cannot see anyone complaining about that.”

At that, both Nail and Naudis fell silent and thought it over. And as he stared at their troubled expressions, Polarth cheerfully continued on.

“So, there is actually one more entreaty I have been entrusted to bring before you all, Sir Asuta.”

“Duke Genos has a request for us?”

“Correct. I believe you have likely already heard a fair bit on the matter, but we would like your assistance when it comes to dealing with the mountain of ingredients delivered to the Turan manor.”

Up until now, Cyclaeus had been over-purchasing all sorts of ingredients with a morbid obsession to monopolize them. But with his fall, the majority of those

ingredients had ended up without a purpose. However, one-sidedly cutting off those agreements with other towns and nations would damage the trust in Genos itself, so even now a massive quantity of ingredients were arriving at the manor each and every day.

“If we can avoid unjust criticism, we intend to reduce such business dealings, but for the next several months we shall have to continue to have those ingredients delivered. With that in mind, if possible it seems wise to try to use those ties to other nations to their fullest. If we can find a proper use for those ingredients here in Genos, there will be no issue whatsoever. And so, could we ask for you to lend us your skill, Sir Asuta?”

“Are you asking me to adapt dishes from the post town to use ingredients from the castle town?”

“Yes, that is precisely it! You know that we had the Daleim house’s head chef Yang sell cooking using milk fat and baked poitan in the post town in order to increase their distribution, correct? We wish to do something similar on an even larger scale, spreading knowledge of the taste of such heretofore unknown ingredients to the good people of the post town. Naturally, I intend to consult with the house of Saturas to have a variety of inns and restaurants working on the project, but I would also appreciate your assistance, Sir Asuta.”

With that, Naudis got a bit of a look in his eyes as he leaned forward.

“Apologies for interjecting, but are you saying we could see not just tau oil, but also Jagar sugar and honey in the post town?”

“That is correct. It could prove quite difficult finding buyers of minmi fruit at five coins each or gyama dried milk at a price of two white coins for a block, but flavorings such as Jagar honey and sugar, reten oil, and mamaria vinegar would surely be gladly welcomed by the people of the post town.”

Naudis then suddenly grabbed my hand.

“Asuta, if we can use Jagar sugar, I should be able to drastically raise the quality of the cooking in my shop, right?”

“That’s true. Back in my home country, we used plenty of sugar in dishes that were like meat and chatchi stew and cubed giba meat stew.”

Since there wasn't any sugar in the post town, I had instead relied on fruit wine alone, since it had a high sugar content. But since those dishes were based on meat and potato stew and cubed pork stew, I really would be grateful to be able to use sugar.

"In that case, I believe I'll be able to keep on selling your dishes as I have been, even with a bit of a rise in price. I get excited just thinking of how tasty that delicious cubed giba meat stew would be when adding in the sweetness of sugar on top!"

"Ah, you're familiar with the taste of sugar, Naudis?"

"Of course. My mother took me to visit my father's homeland many times when I was young. That is why I have long since been disgusted by the nobles of Genos buying up all the Jagar sugar and honey for themselves," he replied, whispering the last bit.

Whether Polarth overheard that or not, he just kept on smiling.

"At present, poitan has just started to circulate in place of fuwano. Considering a single meal's worth doesn't even cost one full red coin, that should make quite a difference for shops that sell a hundred or two hundred meals, would you not say? And we would appreciate it greatly if those extra coins were in turn used to purchase a variety of ingredients."

Naudis and Nail both silently stared at Polarth.

As for the noble in question, his eyes were positively sparkling like a child's.

"And if the flavors of those various ingredients spread throughout the post town, perhaps the townsfolk will begin seeking sugar and herbs from Sym and the like as well. That would give us the option to expand our business dealings with other nations rather than reduce them. Personally, I see this as an opportunity to extend interest in gourmet dining beyond just the castle town, into the post town and Daleim and Turan lands as well."

"Interest in gourmet dining, you say?"

"Indeed. To put it in slightly simpler words, spreading the joy of a delicious meal."

That was precisely what I wanted to convey to the people of the forest's edge.

As I suppressed my surprise, Polarth gave an amused smile.

“Genos is an exceedingly prosperous town. Even in the western territories, it is quite rare for there to be a town where everyone is able to eat meat. If we advanced that one step further and became a town where one could easily eat dishes from all around the world, perhaps a great many more travelers would begin visiting Genos. Jagar cuisine using tau oil and sugar, Sym cuisine employing plentiful herbs, Selva dishes using reten oil, mamaria vinegar, and a variety of vegetables... If such things could be eaten not only inside the castle town but also out in the post town, I believe Genos would become an even more prosperous town, the sort that could be boasted about to the entire world.”

“Did Duke Genos have such a grandiose outlook in mind when he called for us?”

“Hmm? No, what I said just now was nothing more than my own personal opinion,” Polarth replied, his plump cheeks shaking. “But Duke Genos has surely already thought that far into the future. In fact, I would say that is precisely the reason he selected me instead of Sir Melfried for this matter. And also, perhaps it was because he had such hidden intentions that he did not approve of the idea of the castle town monopolizing the giba meat...”

“I see...”

“Expanding our point of view further, perhaps if the price of giba cooking is raised, the people of the post town shall come to understand that delicious meals cost more coins. And then it would be possible that such townsfolk would consider purchasing karon torso meat, even though it costs notably more than leg meat.”

That certainly was quite an ambitious outlook.

But at any rate, we were facing two significant changes with the rise in giba meat prices and the purchasing of new ingredients.

As for the price, we ended up raising the cost of fresh giba meat to 1.5 times its current rate. That was what had been proposed by Polarth.

The idea of raising the price of a meal by the same amount just because the meat was becoming more expensive seemed odd to me, though. After all, if there was no change in the price of vegetables, then that would all just be added profit margin. Still, that price actually seemed appropriate for the dishes served at the stalls.

“In other words, your cooking was too cheap to begin with, Sir Asuta! After all, a dish would surely cost more if it were to use such a considerable amount of karon leg meat. In fact, I would personally say that three red coins is still too cheap,” Polarth stated.

At any rate, the giba burgers and myamuu giba that we had been selling for two red coins were raised by the agreed amount to the price of three red coins.

Meanwhile, Naudis and Nail needed to rack their brains a bit further. Even if the payment for my services and the cost of the baked poitan sold as part of the set remained the same, their giba meals would have to go up to around six red coins. Considering their karon dishes cost four red coins, it seemed like the number of customers ordering my cooking would see a dramatic drop off.

Therefore, they decided to shift things instead by offering half the amount of food for half the price. That would put karon at two red coins, kimyuus at one and a half, and giba at three. That way, people with the finances to afford it could buy two servings of giba cooking, and those without could buy one alongside a cheaper kimyuus meal. That was the stance they chose to adopt.

When I heard that, I decided to imitate their example. Since I was already entrusting the giba burger and myamuu giba stalls to the Ruu clan, I made up my mind to rent two new stalls and serve completely different dishes.

Now that I thought about it, in his attempts to spread knowledge of baked poitan and milk fat, Yang had sold miniature-sized dishes for one red coin each, since those would be more approachable for first-time customers, and the kimyuus meat manju that was my first purchase in the post town had cost two red coins for an adult size but only one for a child size. It seemed to be fairly mainstream here in the post town to offer miniature-sized snacks such as that.

The giba burgers and myamuu giba used 180 grams of giba meat, so they had plenty of volume. So this time around, my thinking was to reduce that volume

to instead sell a dish as cheaply as possible.

After reopening the stalls for business, a month and a half quickly passed by...

And after all sorts of trial and error, both my stalls and the ones run by the Ruu clan were able to achieve superb results.

2

“Well then, I’m off. Let’s both give it our all again today.”

“Right. Make sure to keep your guard up, and make it back home safely.”

The nightmare I had in the morning had caused quite a stir, but regardless, in the end I was able to head out from the Fa house without incident on the nineteenth of the black month.

Ai Fa was remaining behind at the house, so after saying farewell to her I directed the wagon Gilulu was pulling south down the path through the forest’s edge. I was gripping the reins in the driver’s seat, and little Toor Deen was right there behind me. She had wanted to help me for quite some time, and she had finally managed to earn the approval of Gulaf Zaza, who held authority over her clan.

After a little while on the road, the young girl quietly called out, “Um...”

“Yes? What is it?”

“Oh, it’s not a big deal, but...”

“No need to hold back. You can go ahead and say anything that comes to mind.”

“Umm...the breeze feels very nice, doesn’t it?”

Since we were heading down a perfectly straight path right now, I turned around and replied with a smile, “That’s for sure. It seems like we’ll have a nice, pleasant day at work again.”

Toor Deen nervously smiled back. The girl was still just as shy as always, but she was starting to express herself more and more each day.

It had only been around a month since she had started helping out with the

business, but with her unusually high level of cooking skills for such a young age, she was already an indispensable part of our workforce.

Originally, she had been born into the Suun branch houses. After the Suun clan's crimes were exposed, she became a member of the Deen clan along with her father, and had been living earnestly to make up for her former sins. When she was bound by the twisted customs laid down by the former leading clan head, Zattsu Suun, the girl had been like a walking corpse, but she had regained so much vitality and emotion since then.

After twenty minutes or so of chatting with Toor Deen, we arrived at the Ruu settlement. By the time we made it there, the chefs of the Ruu clan already had their own wagon standing by. Since they had expanded the business they were doing in the post town, they had purchased that wagon and a new totos to pull it.

The new totos had been given the gallant name of Jidura. Apparently the word meant "red" in the language of the Eastern Kingdom of Sym, so the Ruu called it that because of its somewhat reddish plumage.

"Good morning, Asuta. Here's to another fine day of work..." Vina Ruu called out, standing next to Jidura with a nonchalant, seductive smile. It seemed that their group today consisted of her, Reina Ruu, and Tsuvai.



Tsuwai was the only fixed member of the group, whereas Reina and Sheera Ruu alternated each day, and Vina Ruu was on a rotation with Lala and Rimee Ruu.

Reina Ruu and Sheera Ruu were the ones in charge when it came to their stalls, and they ended up alternating so that one could always stay behind at the settlement to handle preparations for the next day, making everything flow smoother. All this was possible because over this last month and a half all of the members in their group had learned how to prepare myamuu giba.

As for the other three sisters on rotation, that was because they all wanted to work in the post town, and it was also thanks to Rimee Ruu finally receiving permission from their parents. When the older Vina and Reina Ruu were both going to the post town each day, it had an impact on their work at the main Ruu house, which apparently led them to adopt this system.

Then when the sun hit its peak, one of them would leave the stalls along with me, while Ama Min or Morun Rutim would come to assist in their place. They had strengthened their lineup so that even though they were running two stalls now, they always had three people present.

As for the Fa clan stalls...

“Ah... I-I look forward to working with you again today...” Toor Deen said, now facing away from me.

Following her gaze, I found the other member of our group elegantly approaching.

“I feel much the same.”

It was the former eldest daughter of the main Suun house and current member of the Lea clan, Yamiru Lea.

When I decided to also bolster the lineup for my stalls, I ended up recruiting from the clans under the Ruu. Right away, the Lea clan head Rau Lea firmly insisted that I take Yamiru Lea.

“She’s awkward, lacks strength, and isn’t all that skilled when it comes to cooking. So please, show her how it’s done so that she can make delicious food

like you!” the young Lea clan head had entreated.

Then there was Li Sudra who came to help when the sun hit its peak, rounding out our full group of four running the Fa clan’s stalls.

“Well then, let’s get going. Take care so that our luggage doesn’t fall over, okay?”

“Of course,” Yamiru Lea briefly replied before moving toward the wagon, and Toor Deen scurried out of her way in a fluster.

Still, she used to go pale just seeing Yamiru Lea, so that was progress. While she still got a bit nervous, Toor Deen was in the midst of trying to form a real bond with the older girl.

In the past at the Suun settlement, one was on top while the other was subservient. But now, Yamiru Lea and Toor Deen had been granted new clan names and were trying to live new and different lives. It really was a twist of fate that the pair would end up working together in the post town like this.

But at any rate, we had to be on our way. After getting back in place in the driver’s seat, I took the path south and called out to Yamiru Lea behind me. “When you walked over, you came from the direction of Shin Ruu’s house, didn’t you? Were you meeting with Mida?”

“Indeed.”

“He seems like he’s built up quite a bit of stamina, don’t you think? Ludo Ruu has been saying it may be all right to have him head out into the forest soon.”

“I see.”

She didn’t seem to be in an especially bad mood. This was just how Yamiru Lea always acted lately.

If push came to shove, she could still break out her same sharp tongue, but her usual expression had grown much more gentle, and she felt a lot less like she was tormenting herself. It was honestly hard to imagine now how she had once worn a chilly grin with eyes like a poisonous serpent.

“Still, it certainly is impressive that you’re able to prepare this much food each and every morning...” Yamiru Lea called out to me.

Lately I had taken to preparing the meals for The Sledgehammer and The Great Southern Tree in the morning, so they were already loaded into the wagon.

“It’s not such a big deal. I have the folks living nearby help with the simple preparations, then Toor Deen lends a hand with the trickier parts.”

“Hmm... But you’re paying coins to those women you get help from too, aren’t you?”

“Yes, but it’s a cheap price to pay. And the work only takes two or three hours or so.”

But for this past month and a half the wages for helping were upped to two red coins per hour plus extra based on ability, which was a significant increase. Considering the period back when I kept it at just six red coins for over seven hours, this was more than double. And I arrived at that number by taking into account the daily wages paid in the post town.

“Well, I suppose such expenses are nothing whatsoever to the Fa clan. From what I hear, the Ruu clan now has over twenty silver coins.”

“Ooh, they still have that much left after buying a wagon and two totos? It’s only been a month and a half since they actually went into business for themselves, so that sure is something.”

The Ruu clan had purchased the wagon and totos not just for the sake of business, but also for their clan members. Their wagon was a simple wholesale one without a top, but even so, that purchase had to add up to over three silver coins in total.

By the way, a single silver coin was equivalent to one thousand red coins or a hundred white ones. And so, it was the absolute highest denomination of currency used in the post town.

“I’m sure Tsuvai’s been carefully managing the finances. But still, those really are fantastic results.”

“There’s no need to keep on praising Tsuvai like that. Were the Ruu not able to earn such a fortune precisely because you allotted them so much work? If the Fa clan can manage to create everything needed for the inns without issue,

then what need is there to share that with the Ruu?”

As we already planned out a while back, we were now alternating with the Ruu clan when it came to providing food for the inns.

At first the Ruu clan had offered giba soup while I’d had my meat and chatchi stew and giba sauté arrabbiata, but now Reina Ruu and the others could also make those dishes, so we were splitting things equally. On top of that, I was also now able to offer a brand new dish to The Kimyuus’s Tail, so Reina and Sheera Ruu were in the midst of practicing to make it.

“Still, the Ruu clan also purchased the wagon and the tolos for the sake of their clan members, so I’d say it was a good allocation of funds. And it’s much healthier to do things like this than for the Fa clan to just stockpile a fortune, wouldn’t you say?”

“Just how much of a fortune *has* the Fa clan amassed...? I would be interested in hearing, if it is all right to ask.”

“I’ve got no reason to hide it. Hmm, adding together our current reserves, it should be around 37 silver coins.”

“My, so you don’t even have double what the Ruu clan possesses?”

“Right. That’s because we have to buy more meat from other clans than the Ruu do.”

Putting together what we used at the inns and stalls with the fresh meat we sold, we were currently using 130 kilograms of giba meat per day in the post town. Converting that into fairly sizable giba, you would be talking three of them worth of meat.

Around half of that came from the Fa clan, but there was no way that Ai Fa could hunt down the full amount all on her own. And what was more, the Fa clan entered its half-a-month-long break period starting in the middle of the ashen month.

To compensate, we had to purchase whatever extra we needed from other clans. And we had revised the rate to 120 red coins per giba, so it made for quite an expense.

But, well, thinking of it another way, it meant by buying so much meat, we Fa were sharing our wealth with other clans.

“At any rate, I’m really glad for the fact that we can sell so much meat and so many meals in the post town without facing a significant burden. It’s not a problem at all,” I replied honestly.

We had strengthened our personnel and optimized our business model. Thanks to that, regardless of how we increased our workload, we were able to keep on working while facing less of a burden than before. The majority of the reason for that was because I had started leaving a lot more to the Ruu clan, and the rest was that we had revised our work schedules.

Up until now, we had remained in the post town for five and a half hours, including preparations and clean up. But now, we had managed to shorten that to around three and a half hours.

Previously, we had a bit of a blank period between the morning rush and when the sun hit its peak, and even once that was past, we remained in the post town until the scheduled time arrived. We eliminated that excess time by restricting our operations to just before and after when the sun hit its peak.

However, our sales at the stalls had risen so greatly that that wasn’t a problem at all. Our meals cost one and a half times as much as they used to and our business hours had shortened, but we were getting over double the number of customers we used to.

I figured that was down to the fact that the nobles of Genos had acknowledged the taste of giba meat, as well as justice being served for all those criminals, meaning that fewer folks felt the need to avoid the people of the forest’s edge.

Furthermore, all sorts of unfamiliar ingredients were flowing into the post town one after another, which was making things a bit chaotic. Since I at least had some idea of how to use those ingredients, I had quite an advantage. Thanks to that, I was able to charge straight ahead without any worries about the rise in giba meat prices tripping us up.

This really was a critical moment for us, but in a good way. After all, our work had finally reached the stage where we were trying to truly establish giba

cooking in Genos, so that it wouldn't end up as a mere footnote in history.



And with all that in play, we arrived at the post town.

We borrowed our stalls from The Kimyuus's Tail, purchased vegetables from Dora's place, and delivered the completed meals and fresh meat to the inns. And taking advantage of our numbers, we split those tasks up between us.

By the measurements of this world, it was currently the upper sixth hour. By my internal clock, it would be around 11 AM. And our new work schedule ran from then till the lower second hour, or 2:20 PM or so.

The reason I was able to be so precise in terms of time was because of the sundials we had Polarth purchase for us in the castle town. Currently, the Fa and Ruu houses were each equipped with one, as was my wagon.

After we settled down in our prescribed place for the stalls, we set up that sundial from the wagon in a sunny spot out in the thicket. To make sure we aligned it properly, we had gotten permission from the town guards and then marked it out on a tree's roots. It was possible there could still be a fair bit of error in our measurements, but it was definitely a lot more accurate compared to trying to eyeball it based on the position of the sun in the sky.

When we got to our spot, there were already thirty or so customers waiting there. The first day we reopened, there were around a hundred customers gathered, making for quite a commotion. But when the ducal guards watching over us at the time explained that there was no worry of us running out of food even without them crowding around like they were, that somehow managed to bring things under control.

Even with that in mind, though, we still tended to get around this many customers gathering each morning. And the majority of them were southerners, who tended to be less patient than westerners or easterners.

"Thanks so much for waiting. We'll get things ready soon, so hold on for just a little longer," I called out to the customers as we prepared to open for business.

First off, that meant heating up the pan I ordered through Diel's metalworking group over a flame. Then I placed a steamer basket made from tree bark on top

of it. This new cookware was also something I had requested Polarth purchase for us from the castle town. The diameter was the same as the pan. It was made from a bark akin to tough bamboo, and the bottom had a coarse mesh texture to it. The boiling contents of the pan rose as steam and cooked the ingredients in the basket, so it was basically like what we called a bamboo steamer back in my old world.

After setting two layers of those steamer baskets, I waited for the food to cook. Contained within them were meat-filled manju. I decided to call them giba manju, since that's what I had taken inspiration from when developing this dish.

I packed them with plenty of meat, around 120 grams or so, and also made full use of ingredients that had come flowing in from the castle town in the dish. While the base for the flavor was a familiar tau oil, the more subtle ingredients included not only fruit wine but also Jagar sugar and reten oil. As for the fillings, those included minced giba meat and aria, and also ramanpa nuts and a vegetable called chamcham.

Ramanpa nuts were an ingredient similar to peanuts, and Timalo had used them in his appetizer for the dinner party in the castle town. It really was meant to add an ever-so-slight accent to the flavor, so I only added a single pinch of the ground nuts for each dish.

Chamcham had an amusing name, and apparently it was purchased from some other town in Selva. It became lightly sweet when boiled, and had a unique crisp texture to it. I was using it as a replacement for bamboo shoots.

My giba manju were a size or so bigger than the ones I was familiar with, and though the outer layer was thin, they were stuffed with plenty of filling in exchange. They used around two-thirds the amount of meat as the giba burgers, but they certainly weren't lacking in volume. And currently, we were selling a hundred of them each day at a price of two red coins each.

"Can you handle it? Take care not to let any drop on your legs, all right?"

Hearing that, I turned around and found Toor Deen and Yamiru Lea carrying an iron tray together.

That tray weighed twelve or thirteen kilos at most. But since Yamiru Lea was

exceptionally weak for a woman of the forest's edge, it was still heavy for her, which was why Toor Deen was lending a hand.

I thought to myself how it made for an adorable sight, only for Yamiru Lea to shoot me a glare as a light sweat appeared on her brow.

“What? You look like you have something to say, Asuta.”

“N-No, not at all. Actually, could you handle this flame, Yamiru Lea?”

After entrusting the steamer baskets to Yamiru Lea, I moved over to the other stall where they had set down the iron tray.

Compared to the manju, I was preparing a rather simple dish over here. After grilling giba rib meat dipped in sauce atop the tray, I then wrapped it up in baked poitan along with shredded cabbage-like tino. It was like a simplified myamuu giba recipe.

Each of these only used ninety grams of giba meat and half a poitan, and amounted to a diameter of twelve to thirteen centimeters. While the giba manju used ingredients and tools from the castle town, the aim of this dish was to come up with a simple and direct presentation of giba meat.

In exchange, though, I put some real effort into creating the sauce. It also had a tau oil base and used familiar ingredients such as fruit wine, aria, myamuu, and chitt seeds, but I put in a great deal of experimentation to come up with the ideal yakiniku sauce.

Since I didn't know what else to call it, I was referring to the dish as a giba meat poitan wrap. And we sold 120 of them each day at a price of one and a half red coins.

One of them was enough to make a good snack for women and children, while adult men could buy two of them for the same price and volume of food as the giba burgers. And for folks from Jagar with hearty appetites, it wasn't rare for them to order one each of the giba meat poitan wrap and giba manju.

As I was slicing up the tino for the giba meat poitan wraps, the customer from Jagar at the head of the line called out, “Hey, is it still not ready yet?” with a pained look in his eyes.

“My apologies, but they’ll be ready shortly... Ah, and for anyone after the special menu item, could I have your orders now?”

“Yeah! I’ll get it today for sure!”

When I turned to glance at Toor Deen, she gave a little nod and took off toward the wagon. Before long, she returned holding dozens of thin sticks, bundled together in a sort of wooden tube.

“Go ahead,” I prompted, holding them out toward the customers, at which point the five in the front immediately reached out at the same time. Apparently, all of them were after the special menu item.

At any rate, all five of them each pulled out a stick about twenty-centimeters long simultaneously. While most of them shrugged their shoulders and made comments like, “Damn, a miss,” or, “Ugh,” one of them joyfully proclaimed, “It’s a winner!” When I looked, I saw that sure enough, there was a red mark on the end of their stick.

“Congratulations,” Toor Deen replied with a bashful smile as she once more darted over toward the wagon. And this time around, she returned cradling a large wooden box. Sealed within was the third dish offered by our stalls: the special menu item, a giba cutlet sandwich.

It likely went without saying just what that implied. Unsurprisingly, it involved taking the giba cutlets that were so popular with the people of the forest’s edge and sandwiching them between baked poitan. Since it would be tricky to prepare fried food at the stalls for a variety of reasons, I got these ready first thing in the morning at the house instead.

However, the dish turned out to be quite popular here in the post town too. In fact, it was *too* popular. It was so much of a hit at the test stage that I was concerned my other dishes would stop selling if I just sold it normally.

On top of that, the giba cutlets took a bit longer to prepare than other dishes, and the cost of the ingredients also couldn’t be underestimated. Plus there was the concern that it would create a crazy line early in the morning again if I couldn’t prepare enough, so I ended up choosing the rather unusual sales method of holding drawings for a limited amount of dishes.

Ultimately, I prepared thirty of them for each day. The price was the same three red coins as a giba burger. I had those wishing to make a purchase draw lots, and when they got a dud they purchased a different dish then and there. And since there were an equal number of duds as the total number of dishes on offer between the four stalls, the odds remained the same regardless of when a customer stopped by.

I was pretty nervous as to whether or not this method would work out when I first tried it, but from what I could see, the customers generally seemed to enjoy it.

“Damn! I’ve gotten duds three days in a row now... Well, the other dishes are tasty too, so it’s fine,” one of the first customers to draw grumbled with a conflicted expression on his face. “Still, when you can’t eat something when you want it, it makes you want it all the more. You sure did come up with one heck of a crafty way to do business.”

“Ah ha ha, sorry about that.”

“I’ll get a winner tomorrow for sure! Anyway, hurry up and give me one of those!”

“Right, please hold on for just a little longer.”

It was about the point where the giba manju would be heated through, I figured. And so I set down my vegetable cutting knife and lit the brazier under the iron tray.

“Asuta, we’re ready for business over here,” Reina Ruu called out from the myamuu giba stall.

Giving a nod, I lifted the leather bag full of meat up onto the counter.

“Sorry for the long wait. But we’re now open for business too.”

With that, our day’s work got off to a perfectly tranquil start.

3

“Hey there. Looks like business is booming again today.”

Roy stopped by just before the sun was about to hit its peak.

Having rotated over to the giba manju stall, I smiled and greeted him. “Welcome.” By this point, the young chef from the castle town had clearly become one of our regulars.

Apparently, after losing his job at the Turan manor, he had started doing independent study to improve his cooking skills rather than returning to his old restaurant. Since he had been so well compensated working for Cyclaeus, he could afford not to work for a year or so.

Roy wore a hooded cloak like a traveler in order to avoid attracting attention from the rougher elements about the post town, and from somewhere on the inside he pulled out some red coins.

“I’ll take one. This dish costs two red coins, right?”

“Yes. Thanks for your continued business. It’s hot, so take care not to burn yourself while eating it.”

“I know already. I mean, I’ve already eaten it countless times by this point,” Roy grumbled with an angry look on his freckled face as he accepted the giba manju.

Though they were on the small side compared to the giba burgers, they still had plenty of volume to them as far as meat-filled manju went. And the way that the white steam wafted off of them really stirred up the appetite.

For these manju, I actually used fuwano rather than poitan for the outer layer. Since you couldn’t solidify the poitan by just adding water, you also couldn’t make raw dough with it. And when you added the yam-like gigo to fuwano it gained a puffy texture, which made it well suited for this dish.

As he bit into his giba manju, Roy murmured, “Right.” It seemed he had no complaints with how it had turned out, since it had the same taste as always. And since there was no break in customers in the meantime, I was handing over one dish after another all the while.

Before long, the upper steamer basket was emptied out, so I set another one. Toor Deen had already prepared on the bottom and headed to the wagon with the old one to restock it. And as I did so, Roy followed along behind me as he

chewed away at the giba manju.

“Hey, you really are thriving here.”

“Yes, and I’m grateful for that.”

“Well, I guess it’d be strange if you couldn’t sell something with a taste like this for two red coins. I certainly can’t imagine the paupers of the post town having any complaints.”

“Um, we’re right in the middle of the post town, so I really think you should avoid making comments like that.”

“That’s why I waited to say it until you were the only one who could hear.”

Roy was as mouthy as always.

But, well, as long as he wasn’t heaping abuse on anyone I was close to, I figured it was best to just let it slide. Still, I couldn’t help but find it more than a little frustrating, as I really was kinda fond of this foul-mouthed young chef.

“Hey, roughly how many meals have your stalls been selling?” Roy asked as I refilled the steamer basket with giba manju.

“Let’s see, we sell one hundred of those giba manju you’re eating each day, 120 of the giba meat poitan wraps from the other stall, and thirty of the special menu item, the giba cutlet sandwiches. Oh, and as for the Ruu clan’s stalls, they’ve been selling eighty each of the giba burgers and myamuu giba.”

That was the number we could sell without extras in just over three hours on a single day. Our sales really had undergone a rapid expansion, when one considered that not long ago we were preparing 150 meals and having leftovers after five hours.

Actually, the sales couldn’t even be properly compared since the price itself had risen, but the Ruu alone were moving a bit more than we used to, and then the new dishes on offer at the Fa clan stalls added even more to that.

What was most exciting to me, though, was that we were now getting more customers from the west. Up until now they made up around twenty percent of our clientele, but now that number had risen to about forty percent. And when you added on the increased number of people stopping by to check things out,

I'd say we now had five times as many people coming by our stalls. That above all else was proof of how discrimination against the people of the forest's edge and giba meat was lessening.

"Still, all of your prices are just two or three red coins. You can't be turning much of a profit like that, can you?"

"That's not true at all. We've been earning more than enough for our efforts. And also...at least for now, the people of the forest's edge don't pay any taxes."

"Huh? Why's that? You're technically all citizens of Genos, aren't you?"

"Yes. But up until now, the only work they did was as hunters, so there were no earnings to tax. That's why in exchange for being banned from cultivating fields or gathering the fruits of the forest, they were granted an exemption from taxes. In fact, from what I've been told, the people of the forest's edge don't even know what taxes are to begin with."

"Hmph! That's why everyone calls the people of the forest's edge..." Roy started to say, only to suddenly hold his tongue. He was probably intending to say something like "barbarians." But now he was awkwardly silent as he turned away.

Still, if he could feel awkward about something like that, then I was sure he could eventually revise how he regarded the folks from the post town too. And that was why I couldn't bring myself to truly hate the guy, even as rude as he was.

"Well, not like I care either way... Now that I think about it, I heard the head chef from the house of Daleim was running a shop in the post town. How is that going?"

"Oh, Yang's place? From what I've been told, recently he expanded beyond just the stall and has made an inn's dining hall the center of his business, where he's been revealing all sorts of dishes. After all, his main goal now is to help popularize all those ingredients flowing in from the castle town."

"Hmph... I hear the head chef has a fairly noteworthy reputation too. He sure got mixed up in quite the enjoyable little commotion."

"He's said he finds it to be a really satisfying, worthwhile job. And, well, the

inn's owner is seemingly even more passionate," I said with a chuckle as I picked up the steamer basket and returned to the stall.

When I got there, I found a customer I was well acquainted with. Someone who left Roy taken aback.

The older man had a thin yet firm build, and a stern face that looked like it was carved out of an oak. It was Mikel of Turan, the former chef from the castle town who presently worked as a charcoal seller.

"Welcome. Thanks for your continued business," I called out.

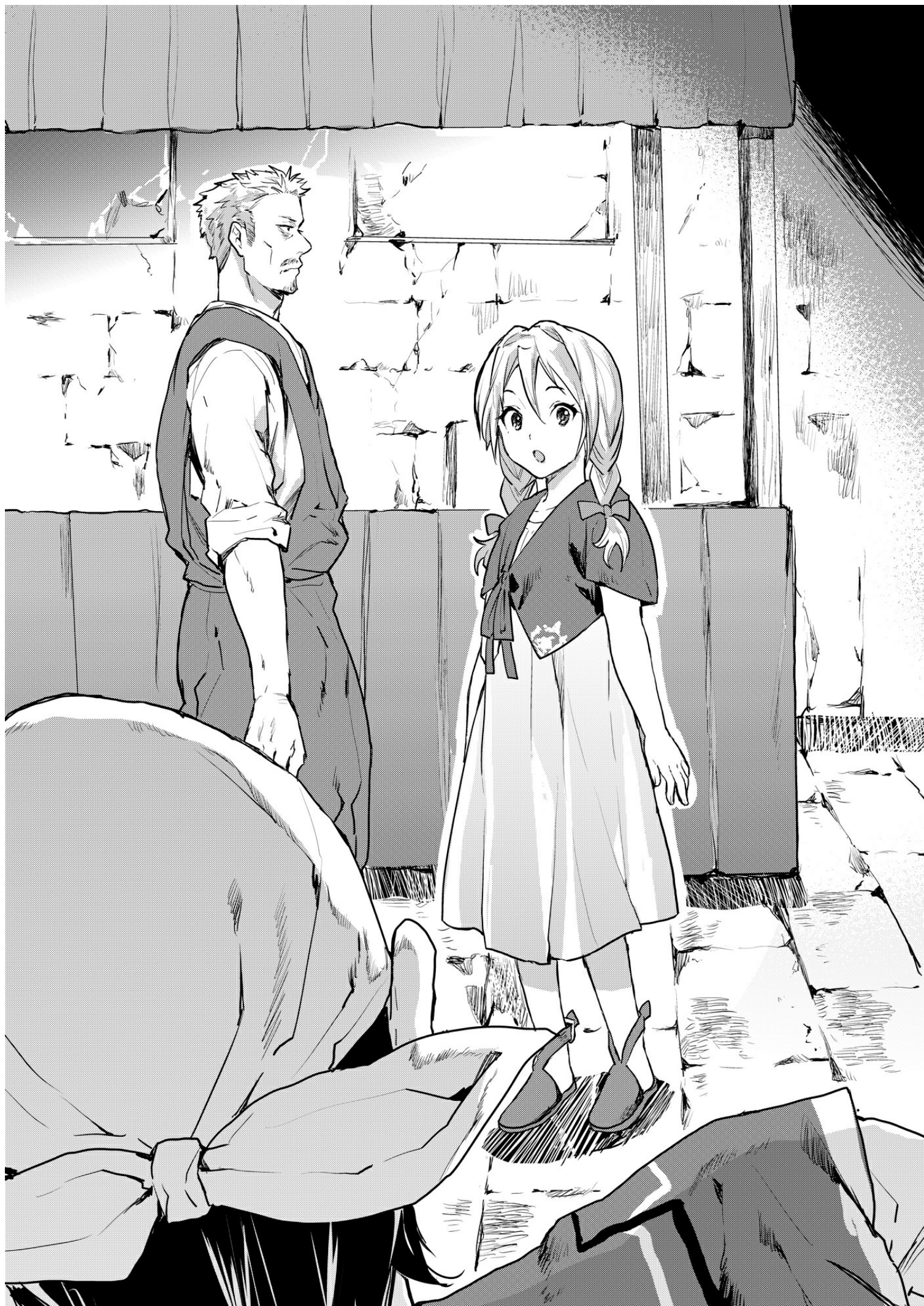
In the meantime, I stole a glance out of the corner of my eye at Roy and found him frozen in place with a look of astonishment. From what I knew, the two of them had likely worked in the kitchen of the same restaurant in the past.

"Ah, there you finally are. I've got some business with you today..." Mikel said, somehow looking even more cranky than usual.

Then, a little head of dark brown hair peeked out from behind him. As I was wondering just who that could be, she nervously stepped from behind Mikel's back.

"P-Pleased to meet you! My name is Myme, and I'm Mikel's daughter."

"Huh? Y-You're Mikel's daughter?" I reacted without thinking.



While I had heard Mikel had a family, I never imagined he would have such a young daughter.

No matter how I figured it, Mikel had to be around fifty, while this girl looked to be about Toor Deen's age, ten or so at most. And she was a seriously adorable young girl at that, with her long dark-brown hair dangling down in front of her chest in braids.

Her skin color was typical of a westerner, and her light brown eyes shone brightly. She was wearing the sort of dress I often saw around the post town with an embroidered vest on top, and she held a large woven basket by the handles.

"I'm honored to meet you, Asuta of the Fa clan! Umm... I look forward to this experience, and hope you will forgive my lack of skill."

"Huh? Umm... Yeah, nice to meet you."

I didn't know what experience she was referring to, but at any rate I bowed back to her, only for Myme to shoot me a flustered yet joyful smile. Her grin was as charming and earnest as that of Rimee Ruu or Tara.

"I've wanted to meet with you ever since dad let me sample your cooking! And today, that wish has finally been granted!"

"Glad to hear it," I replied as I looked and saw her father wearing a stern, sour expression.

Ever since we reopened for business in the ashen month, Mikel had been purchasing two meals and apparently bringing them back to the Turan lands. I didn't mind that at all, but still, why were the two of them standing there with such completely opposite looks on their faces?

"Umm, hold on for just a bit, all right?" I said as I set down the steamer basket in the stall and nodded to a worried-looking Toor Deen before once again facing Mikel. "So, what exactly is your business with me?"

"I'm not the one with business. It's this idiot daughter of mine."

"That's mean. You shouldn't go calling your own daughter an idiot in front of people like that," Myme somewhat firmly chided, showing her stronger side.

Then, she turned back toward me and held out her large basket. “Umm, the truth of the matter is, I’m in the midst of trying out all sorts of dishes after being inspired by your cooking... If you don’t mind, could you see if you like this one?”

“You want me to try your cooking? But why me?”

“Your unusual cooking left a deep, deep impression on me! And that had a big impact on how I flavored this dish, so I would like to have you give it a taste.”

I felt like I could understand her reasoning, but also not really.

Still, she was the daughter of Mikel, who had once been a prominent chef in the castle town. I was honestly quite curious.

“Umm... There are customers watching, so why don’t we move a bit over that way?”

After letting Toor Deen know the plan, I once again headed over to the wagon, accompanied by Mikel, Myme, and Roy. Mikel still didn’t seem to recognize Roy, and as for the young chef, he seemed to be thinking something but ultimately didn’t speak up.

“P-Please, go right ahead! It should be cool enough to not burn you! And I put a wooden spoon inside too!”

“Right, thanks.”

Inside the basket Myme handed me was a lidded clay container and a wooden spoon.

When I touched it, I found that the container was still piping hot. I placed it atop the wagon, removed the hefty lid, and took in the impressively sweet aroma that came flowing forth.

I see. So it’s a stewed kimyuus leg dish, huh?

Kimyuus was a type of bird with meat that had very similar qualities to chicken.

And that kimyuus leg had been heated with the bone still inside as part of a red soup. The sweet smell must have meant that it used a fruit wine base. Actually, I couldn’t even spy any further ingredients. You could just call the whole dish a kimyuus fruit wine stew.

Perhaps because the clay container was so thick, the contents were still plenty hot even after being transported all the way from the Turan lands. The soup had a good bit of thickness to it, and the leg meat half soaking in it sure did make it look tasty.

“Dad said you utilized the sweetness from fruit wine in your cooking, so I tried out all sorts of things too. Please, dig in,” Myme stated, her cheeks flushed with both tension and excitement. Though she was polite, she was also passionate and resolute. She really did strike a contrast with Toor Deen despite the two seeming close in age.

Secretly feeling excited, I grabbed hold of the spoon and faced the dish head on. But then, I suddenly had a concern: Just how exactly would I eat meat still on the bone with only a single spoon?

“Ah, I boiled the meat until it got nice and soft, so eating it with a spoon should be no issue.”

“I see. Thanks.”

When I used my spoon on the meat, sure enough it peeled right off.

The inside of the meat was ivory white, while the bone was a glossy white. While it had a simple appearance, the aroma really got me looking forward to tasting it.

As such thoughts ran through my head, I brought the spoonful of meat steeped in fruit wine soup to my mouth...and was left dumbfounded. A far more delicious flavor than I had ever expected exploded forth in my mouth.

The mellow sweetness I was tasting certainly did belong to fruit wine. However, that wasn't all. There were definitely a variety of grated vegetables added in there too. Aria, tarapa, and nenon...and I got the feeling there might have been just a hint of chatchi and pula too. Combined with the amount of salt used, it was all in fantastic harmony.

And that astoundingly exquisite soup had soaked thoroughly into the kimyuus meat. Plus, the stock from the kimyuus had infused properly back into the soup too. Boiling not only the meat but also the bone surely had an impact there.

Kimyuus meat without the skin had a simple taste like chicken tenders. Since

it cost even less than karon leg meat, it was the cheapest meat on offer in Genos. And yet this kimyuus meat was unbelievably tasty. It was so tender that you didn't even need to chew, and it seemed to pleasantly melt together with the soup as it passed down your throat.

There weren't any special ingredients or anything in the dish. It didn't even employ the pico leaves or myamuu I made frequent use of. It was made using meat, salt, and vegetables that could all be easily obtained in the post town, as well as cheap fruit wine. Nonetheless, it was incredibly delicious.

As I trembled inside, I went for a second bite.

And as I carefully tasted it, I grew confident: this was the most delicious dish I had ever tasted here in Genos.

This dish was far more tasty than the ones made by Nail, Naudis, Milano Mas...or even Yang, Roy, and Timalo.

Of course, that was ultimately just by my own personal standards. Up until now, only a very limited number of ingredients were available in the post town and their culinary techniques were underdeveloped, while the trends of the castle town seemed to be toward more tricky sorts of flavorings. And so, it would be no surprise to hear my preferences weren't applicable there.

Still, Myme's cooking was just so undeniably delicious that it easily overcame any such quibbles. Though the dish used just the limited ingredients of the post town, and was created under the guidance of her father who used to be a chef in the castle town, it was a flavor that even someone born in another world like myself could find no faults with.

I had also given instructions on how to prepare kimyuus meat at The Kimyuus's Tail, and from what I was told my creations had earned a good reputation. However, this dish was even more delicious. I had no doubt that it was on a whole other level compared to the kimyuus meatballs and kimyuus meat omelettes I had come up with.

"This... This is incredibly tasty," I finally stated, causing Myme to break out in a look of excitement. As I stealthily wiped away a cold sweat, I turned to face Mikel. "It really is something, creating such a delicious flavor without using anything like sugar or tau oil... I guess I should have expected as much from

your daughter, Mikel.”

“I had nothing to do with it. You’re the one who came up with the idea to use fruit wine in cooking, aren’t you?”

“Even so, I don’t have the skill to make something with a taste like this.”

“What are you saying?! Your cooking is definitely tastier than mine, many times over!” Myme objected, but I shook my head.

“No. Or if it is, it’s only because I use giba meat. I still haven’t succeeded at making a kimyuus dish this delicious.”

“Huh? There’s no way that’s true!” Myme protested, adorably puffing up her cheeks.

It was then that Roy finally interjected.

“Mikel, could I try that dish too?”

“Hmm...? And you are...?”

“My name is Roy. We worked together at The Maiden in White. Back then I was just a kid in training, though, so I’m sure you don’t remember me.”

For some reason, Roy had an intense look in his eyes.

And whether he remembered the young chef or not, Mikel’s brow furrowed in displeasure.

“At any rate, you’re asking the wrong person. This has nothing to do with me.”

With the same intense gaze, Roy now glared at Myme.

In response, the girl’s eyes opened wide in a puzzled stare.

“Are you Asuta’s friend?”

“I’m a customer at his stalls. And I used to work at a restaurant in the castle town.”

“Ah, so you worked in the same place as Dad? I would be greatly honored to have such a person eat my cooking,” Myme answered with a carefree grin.

Silently, Roy accepted the wooden spoon from me. Then, as he took a bite of

Myme's dish, he firmly shut his eyes and went silent for a bit before turning toward Mikel.

"Mikel, did your daughter really prepare this?"

"I've already said that plenty of times now, haven't I?"

"I see. Still, this is the taste of your cooking..." Roy murmured, placing down the spoon and backing off without even turning around.

And in his place, a slender figure approached.

"Sorry for the wait, Asuta. It's time for me to rotate in now."

"Ah, thanks for coming, Li Sudra."

At some point, the sun had crept close to its peak.

After giving a slight bow to Mikel and Myme, Li Sudra walked over to the stalls. That meant Morun Rutim must have arrived too. And then, Reina Ruu also came over from the Ruu stalls.

"Asuta, is something the matter?"

"Ah, Reina Ruu, you should also try this..." I started to say, but then I held my tongue. The people of the forest's edge weren't supposed to eat from the same plate unless the other person was family. So unfortunately, I would be the only one able to finish off the rest of this dish. "Sorry, could you hold on just a bit longer?"

As Reina Ruu and Myme watched, I went ahead and wolfed down the rest. And as I did so, that delicious flavor was engraved deeper and deeper onto my tongue.

Just why was this dish so tasty? It was just like magic.

I felt like I was being hit by the same sort of shock I had given to the people of the forest's edge and the citizens of Genos up till now.

"It really is too delicious to put into words. You're amazing, Myme."

"I'm incredibly honored to hear you say so, Asuta. It certainly was worth working up the courage to come here to the post town to meet you."

Myme really did look overjoyed.

And then, her gaze shifted back and forth between me and Reina Ruu.

“Umm... Are you perhaps going to go prepare food for the inns?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“In that case... Umm, would it be all right for me to accompany you?”

“Huh? But why?”

“I want to see you cook, Asuta. I... I admire you...” Myme answered, her face adorably turning as red as a tarapa.

If anyone else told me that I would be honored, but right now I had somewhat complex feelings on the matter.

“I’m really not anything that special. You’re way more skilled, aren’t you?”

“What are you saying?! I’m nothing but a novice trying to follow in your and Dad’s footsteps!”

“Hmm, I’m honored to hear you say so, but still...I can’t go inviting someone into an inn’s kitchen all on my own. After all, that would be imposing on the owner.”

“I see...” Myme replied, hanging her head. But in the next instant, she was once again shooting me a resolute look. “In that case, could I watch you prepare food in your home?”

“What’re you even saying? They live in the settlement at the forest’s edge, you know,” Mikel chided with a frown, but the look in Myme’s eyes didn’t shift.

There was the same passionate shine there that I had seen from Reina and Sheera Ruu. The pure blaze of someone who just wanted to improve themselves as much as possible when it came to cooking.

“Is that not possible either? I promise I won’t get in your way! I just want to know what sorts of techniques you use to create flavors like that!”

“Myme, here in Genos the law states you’re not to set foot in the settlement at the forest’s edge without reason. Are you placing your cooking higher than the laws of Genos?”

“Ah, I’ve been told that comes from the fact that the forest’s edge is a

dangerous place... But as long as you don't have ill intent, coming there shouldn't be a crime in and of itself," I interjected. "My house has also welcomed a guest from the east before too. So as long as the head of my clan and the leading clan heads give their approval, it should be possible to invite you two to the forest's edge as well."

"You mean..." Myme uttered, her eyes sparkling.

And staring straight back at her, I replied, "If that's what you want, then I'll talk to them about it. But in exchange, could you hear out a request of my own?"

"You're asking me? But what could I ever do for you?" Myme asked, her eyes going wide with bewilderment.

"The same exact thing. I'd like to see you cook too, Myme," I answered with a smile.

4

After that, Reina Ruu and I hurried on over to The Kimyuus's Tail. As we walked along, the second Ruu daughter was in quite a huff.

"I can't believe that at all."

"But it's the truth. That girl seemed to have more polished cooking skills than I do."

"There's just no way such a young girl is as good as you say. You must be terribly confused somehow, Asuta."

"I don't see how, since I'm just offering my earnest impressions after actually eating the dish she prepared."

"I just don't see how that could possibly be true..." Reina Ruu retorted, cutely turning away.

Still, I had no intention of retracting my statement. After all, I saw it as a hard, unshakable fact.

Of course, it wasn't as if I was totally convinced that my skills fell short of

Myme's. But if we were to do a taste test to compare under the same conditions at present, there was a very solid chance she would defeat me. Even if nobody else would acknowledge it, that was something I had sensed personally with my own tongue.

Now that I thought back on it, I never felt like I had lost to Roy, Yang, or Timalo. Since we were born and raised in completely different environments, the tastes we sought were just too divergent. No matter how skilled they might be as chefs, or how impressive and surprising their skills and ideas were, I wasn't able to truly find their cooking delicious from the depths of my heart.

But for some reason, my cooking was able to bring joy to the people of the forest's edge, the folks from the post town, and the nobles of the castle town. While I occasionally faced some harsh words, at the root of things they acknowledged my food as delicious.

And so, I was sure that Myme's cooking could move everyone too. At the very least, that was the case for me. That was exactly why I couldn't just disregard her.

"Well, if Donda Ruu and Ai Fa and everyone agree to it, I should be able to invite her to the forest's edge. Then that should clear everything up, right?"

"I suppose. Since you're saying all that, I certainly feel a need to try her cooking too."

It was around that point in the conversation that we arrived at The Kimyuus's Tail. This was the one inn we still visited in the afternoon to prepare the food in person.

"Sorry that we're a little late," I called out as we passed through the door and were greeted by Milano Mas's frowning face.

"You're not late. And even if you were, that just means you would be leaving later anyway."

"I suppose that's true. Well then, we'll be getting to work."

When we entered the kitchen, the ingredients we had delivered were laid out atop the work station.

Seemingly having gotten herself back on track, Reina Ruu broke out in a smile.

“I’m looking forward to working with you again today. If we can receive your instruction a few more times, I’m sure Sheera Ruu and I will be able to handle the cooking for this place too.”

“Yup, let’s give it our all.”

After reopening the stalls for business a month and a half ago, I had also been preparing two dishes for The Kimyuus’s Tail. The one I was making today was sweet and sour giba.

Just as the name implied, the dish was modeled after sweet and sour pork, and it made full use of the mamaria vinegar and sugar that had been flowing in from the castle town.

Firstly, I beat the giba thigh meat with a wooden pole, then after severing the tendons, I cut it into cube-shaped chunks two centimeters on a side. Once that was done, I coated them in a bit of tau oil and fruit wine, then seasoned them.

In the meantime, I used reten oil to fry up aria, nenon, pula, and the chamcham I used in place of bamboo shoots in the giba manju.

After all that, I then coated the thigh meat in a thin layer of fuwano flour and fried it. This would all be reheated later, so my goal was to condense the delicious flavors and improve the texture. In order to prevent an excess of oil in the dish, I tried to keep the frying time to a minimum. Once that was done, I set about making the sauce to go with it.

I brought tau oil and sugar to a simmer in a pot, added in mamaria vinegar and chatchi starch with water, carefully stirred so lumps wouldn’t form, and then once it thickened a bit I threw in the main ingredients and heated them through. Since it would be reheated before being served to the customers anyway, I stopped it before it boiled too far down, completing my work.

“Milano Mas, what’s the reception of the sweet and sour giba been like?” I called out to the inn owner standing in the doorway to the kitchen.

“So-so,” he bluntly answered. “The other dish still sells out quicker, but there hasn’t been any need for us to deal with leftovers or anything. The sales have really improved in the past month and some change, so I suppose there’s no

real issue.”

“I see. That sounds like good news, then.”

By the way, the other dish I alternated this one with each day was a tino roll modeled after cabbage rolls, and that had supposedly been a big hit right from the start.

On the other hand, sales of the sweet and sour giba had only just reached the levels I anticipated. When it came to introducing new ingredients to the post town, mamaria vinegar ended up being the first barrier in my way.

Now that I thought about it, the people of the post town were only familiar with sourness through the lemon-like sheel, strawberry-like arow, and prune-like dried kiki. And so apparently, vinegar was a bit too novel for them. Yang had also thought of serving pickled vegetables and karon drizzled in vinegar as dishes on offer at the inn he was working with, but from what I was told, none of them were really selling.

However, Polarth had a strong desire for the usage of mamaria vinegar to spread throughout the post town. Poitan was steadily replacing fuwano in the local diet, and apparently that was quickly ramping up the pressure on the finances of the house of Turan.

“Though that was initially the goal, Cyclaeus has now been officially judged. That is why I would like to see as much mamaria vinegar selling as possible for the sake of Sir Torst, who is devoting himself to rebuilding the house of Turan,” he had said.

That mamaria vinegar was produced along with fruit wine on the Turan lands. From Polarth’s point of view, it was like he had stabbed the house of Turan in the back and caused unintentionally deep wounds, so perhaps that was why he was left in a fluster, worrying about the state of affairs.

“If anything, I’d have to say that sauce you made to go with the kimyuus meat omelettes has become pretty popular. What was it called again? Ketchup?” Milano Mas asked.

“Yes. But the base for that is tarapa first and foremost, with the mamaria vinegar just providing a bit of subtle flavoring. I’d say that mayonnaise uses

more of the stuff.”

“I see. Well, at any rate, there’s no need for you to worry about how things play out for the nobles. It’d be good for them to suffer a bit of poverty too for a change,” Milano Mas stated, but he didn’t look all that serious.

Now that the criminals had all been judged, it seemed his anger toward the house of Turan had vanished. I had no reason to doubt that, especially since the man’s distrust toward the people of the forest’s edge had also gone away when Zattsu Suun’s crimes had been brought to light.

“I’m sorry that it seems like The Kimyuus’s Tail drew the short end of the stick. How about you stop selling the sweet and sour giba and I come up with something new?”

“It’s not like we’re getting stuck with leftovers or anything, so it’s no issue. Or do you intend to give up on spreading this new flavor after just a month and a bit? You’re surprisingly impatient, aren’t you?”

“No, I just don’t want to place a burden on The Kimyuus’s Tail, so—”

“I’m telling you, it’s no burden at all. You sure do love to go on and on, don’t you?” Milano Mas grumbled with a frown.

I couldn’t help but worry I had been taken in by his gruff demeanor and unintentionally allowed myself to rely on Milano Mas’s kindness.

“At any rate, I’ve clearly been getting more customers thanks to you. I’ve even been seeing customers come for the food when they aren’t staying here, which never used to happen.”

“I really am glad to hear that, but still...”

Beyond just giba dishes, The Kimyuus’s Tail also sold other food I thought up, which included karon strips cooked in fruit wine, karon milk soup, kimyuus meatballs, and kimyuus meat omelettes, which had apparently made dinnertime there quite busy.

On top of that, the variety of sauces added over the meats and vegetables such as Worcestershire sauce, ketchup, and mayonnaise had also been favorably received. So if that meant I had been able to pay back even a fraction

of what I owed Milano Mas, then I was glad.

“If you come up with something new and fantastic then I certainly wouldn’t mind. But if you don’t, there’s no need to force the menu to change. Not when that girl there’s just about mastered this dish, right?”

Reina Ruu nodded with a polite smile.

Taking the towel off my head, I bowed to Milano Mas. “Thank you. I’ll keep giving my all so that your kindness doesn’t go to waste.”

“I keep telling you, you don’t need to bow all the time like that.”

After saying farewell to Milano Mas, who remained grouchy right to the very end, we departed from The Kimyuus’s Tail.

“You’ve been getting better, Reina Ruu, so it looks like we’ve got a bit of extra time on our hands. How about we stop by The Westerly Wind for a bit?”

“Well, I certainly don’t mind, but still...” Reina Ruu replied, staring at me with adorable upturned eyes. “Somehow, I feel like I can tell what you’re thinking even more than usual today. Should I try guessing your thoughts right now?”

“Huh? That’s a scary thing to say. It’s not like I’m thinking anything weird, you know.”

“Is that so? Then feel free to just brush it off as a practical joke on my end... Aren’t you wondering just what sort of dish that Myme girl would make using mamaria vinegar?”

I ended up staring at Reina Ruu in shock.

And in response, she shot me a glare like a sulking child.

“You’ve been able to use vinegar without any trouble because you were familiar with the ingredient to start with, right, Asuta? So I certainly can’t imagine that girl making a dish that would surpass what you’ve created so easily.”

“Yeah, that may be true...”

I hadn’t intended to go so far as to bring up Myme in hypotheticals like that.

At any rate, Reina Ruu’s mood just didn’t seem to recover as we headed over

to The Westerly Wind.

The inn was located along a backstreet that didn't see much traffic. It was a bit of a dangerous area, the sort of place where you shouldn't ever set foot alone after dark. In terms of scale, The Westerly Wind was bigger than The Sledgehammer but smaller than The Kimyuus's Tail.

"Hey there, Asuta! It sure is rare for you to stop by at this time of day," Yumi called out from behind the inn's reception desk.

The place was built so you entered the dining hall right after you stepped through the door, with that desk in the back. And currently, there were five ruffians drinking there in the middle of the day.

"Yeah. I figured we haven't had time to chat lately. So, how are the giba dishes selling?"

"It's going perfectly! I figure we're at the point where we can buy enough meat for another ten meals' worth and still sell out."

I had been able to enter into business with The Westerly Wind too. However, I wasn't offering them my cooking. Instead, all I did was sell them raw meat.

In the past, Yumi had told me her father had a strong prejudice against the people of the forest's edge, so it was possible he would have asked me to prepare karon or kimyuus dishes rather than giba ones.

And so, I chose a roundabout approach. Which is to say, I only taught him how to make delicious giba dishes, setting things up so that he would want to order giba meat.

If I sold him my dishes directly, then they would end up costing more than other meals. And it was right after Polarth advised us to revise our prices, so that difference would become even more striking. It was then that I raised the proposal that they could earn more of a profit by purchasing the giba meat directly and then cooking it themselves.

As for the meals I instructed The Westerly Wind on, they were okonomiyaki and karon milk soup. Those dishes could be made without needing too much meat, so it was possible to keep the prices at the same level as meals made with karon. Plus, the process of cooking them was quite simple.

When I was finally able to actually show off those dishes at The Westerly Wind, that was when I somehow managed to form a contract to sell them fresh meat.

At first it had been kept to five kilos of meat a day, but now it had increased to fifteen. In terms of pure numbers, that was around double the amount of fresh meat ordered by The Great Southern Tree, which was our largest business partner. Of course, that was because they sold my giba cooking directly, so they had less of a need for fresh meat.

“Once tau oil started spreading throughout the post town, you taught us how to make Worcestershire sauce and mayonnaise, right, Asuta? That seems to have really improved the sales of the okonomiyaki.”

“Yeah, back where I came from, you added those on top of okonomiyaki too. I figured that would be more popular than sprinkling salt on top or dipping them in soup.”

“You sure were right on the mark. My dad’s always making a weird face nowadays, like he’s happy and frustrated at the same time,” Yumi replied with an exceptionally joyful grin. Naturally, I was quite satisfied with the results myself.

Our long-held goal had been to sell giba meat itself rather than just my cooking. Nail and Naudis had been purchasing some, but that was ultimately to supplement whatever extra they needed in addition to my cooking. The Westerly Wind ended up being the first inn to solely purchase giba meat from us.

“But no matter how much meat is getting sold, none of the profit goes to you, does it? That part sort of frustrates me.”

“There’s no need for that. The more fresh meat starts selling, the more the wealth spreads around to clans other than just my own. So I really am grateful to you for persuading your father to do business with us, Yumi.”

“Stop saying embarrassing stuff like that, jeez!” Yumi chuckled, slapping me on the back. It was lighter than a slap from a girl from the forest’s edge like Lala Ruu, but it still certainly did sting.

“No, I really mean it. When I first started doing business, I never even imagined this much giba meat would be selling all over the post town after just four months or so.”

Including what was used in the completed dishes, we were currently selling 130 kilos of giba meat in the post town each day. Or in terms of people, we were probably talking around six or seven hundred folks eating giba every day.

In terms of the overall population of Genos, that might still have been pretty small. But still, it was hard to wrap my head around how not a single one of those people would even touch giba meat until four months ago.

And nobody could have predicted we would be advised to adjust the price since it was selling so well. As I stood there between Yumi and Reina Ruu’s smiling faces, I was filled with a secret joy and a sense of satisfaction.

5

After finishing up our work in the post town, we returned to the Ruu settlement first.

The time was halfway through the lower second hour, or around 3 p.m. by my reckoning. My daily routine had me remaining here for two hours, preparing the food for tomorrow and also giving cooking lessons.

“Hey there. Good work again today, everybody,” a large figure chopping firewood greeted as we pulled the wagon around to the back of the main house.

It was the hunter from Masara, survivor of the Red Beards bandit group, Bartha. She had been released from the castle and was currently staying here in the Ruu settlement along with her son Jeeda.

“The fact that I was a survivor of the Red Beards got out, after all. So it’d be a little tough to just head back home to Masara,” Bartha had said after reuniting with Jeeda.

However, though the nobles held a grudge against her old bandit group, the common folk had idolized them. When I went ahead and pointed that out, she retorted, “That’s what’d make it so hard to go back.”

And so, Bartha petitioned Donda Ruu to stay in the settlement at the forest's edge for a while. She didn't go so far as to ask to be made a person of the forest's edge, though. But at the very least, she wanted to remain until her son Jeeda learned a bit more about what it really meant to have the spirit of a hunter.

"Leading clan head Donda Ruu, I feel like Jeeda could learn how to live properly as a hunter under you. Since I can't say I'm a better hunter than him anymore, I don't think I can keep leading him well like I used to."

With some extra backing from Mia Lea Ruu behind it, Donda Ruu ultimately ended up accepting her request.

And that was how Bartha and Jeeda ended up living in the Ruu settlement's vacant house.

"I see you're working hard too, Bartha. Chopping firewood again today?"

"Yeah, since it feels like what I'm most suited to," Bartha replied.

Her appearance really had undergone quite a change. Currently, she was wearing her long dark-brown hair down instead of pulled up tightly into a bun, and in place of her previous leather armor and masculine attire, she had on a cloth dress.

On her wrist she wore a bracelet to ward away insects, and there were leather sandals on her feet. Aside from the lack of a necklace of blessings, she was dressed just like a woman of the forest's edge.

"It's easier dressing like this for work around the house," Bartha had stated, but when I first saw her in that outfit it gave me quite a shock. Not because it didn't suit her, though. If anything, it was the opposite. In that attire, I couldn't see Bartha as anything but a truly mature woman.



Naturally there hadn't been any changes to her intense leonine face, nor to her arms and shoulders that were just as muscular as any man's. Plus, her build was still just as burly as Jiza Ruu's, with a height even greater than Darmu Ruu.

But even so, Bartha was undoubtedly a woman. Or to be more exact, she was a mother.

Her appearance, speech, and actions hadn't changed, but there was a gentler look in her eyes than before, and her strength now felt motherly instead. That was the impression she was giving me.

Perhaps Bartha had also had some sort of change of heart after that struggle with Cyclopeus. Until that point, she had tried to guide Jeeda as a hunter, but now she would do so as a mother... That just might have been what she was thinking.

It wasn't as if Bartha had abandoned her work as a hunter, though. Up until the sun hit its peak, while the giba were still sleeping, she entered the forest with Jeeda and hunted wild birds.

Naturally, they had received permission from Genos. After all, the giba didn't prey upon the birds that lived at the base of Mount Morga, so there were no laws against such actions.

"Even if they aren't as good as barobaro, there are plenty of fine birds flying around out there. It really is a mystery why nobody tried to hunt them before now."

That was surely because the people of the forest's edge ate giba, while the townsfolk ate kimyuus and karon, which were raised as livestock. And the people of the forest's edge would never be permitted to devote their efforts to hunting birds instead of giba, while the townsfolk would surely never set foot in the forest to begin with.

At any rate, Bartha and Jeeda hunted birds out in the forest, then traded their meat for coins by way of Polarth. The meat from just two hunters wouldn't be enough to throw any supply chains out of sorts, and there were apparently also a fair number of connoisseurs in the castle town with an interest in something as unusual as wild bird meat.

Then, after the sun peaked, Jeeda would also join in the giba hunts. Thanks to the boy's fantastic skills as a hunter, Donda Ruu granted him permission to participate.

"I spent more than a few years facing down gaaje leopards up on Mount Masara myself, you know," Barthia had explained, "but I didn't feel like putting in the training needed to hunt down something as ferocious as a giba at this point, so I've been helping the women out with their work instead."

That was the current state of affairs with Barthia and Jeeda.

It had also become the norm that she would help man the stove when we made it back too.

By the way, though Li Sudra had been returning right away to help with work at home up until now, since we shortened our work hours, she was now participating in this combined prep work and study session. It was only around a one-hour extension over our initial agreement, and since I proposed paying her for it too, the Sudra clan head consented.

"I really am grateful. Thanks to you, Asuta, I've been able to share delicious cooking with the members of my family, at least a little."

Li Sudra had become a first-rate member of our group. While I couldn't bring myself to literally rank everyone or anything, Vina and Lala Ruu probably still hadn't caught up to her yet. Though she didn't stand out as much as Rimee Ruu or Toor Deen, cooking must have been in her nature to start with.

And when we got to the main house's kitchen, Sheera Ruu was waiting there for us, working away at the preparations for tomorrow's business. As she stirred a pot that was giving off a wonderful aroma, she offered us a gentle smile.

"The tarapa sauce and aria are already done, so all that's left is mincing the meat and making the patties."

"Thanks. Well then, let's all finish that up together."

Reina Ruu, Tsuvai, Morun Rutim, and Barthia all joined in. Then there was Toor Deen, Yamiru Lea, and Li Sudra from our end, preparing the food to be sold in the Fa stalls.

“Okay, Yamiru Lea and Li Sudra, I’ll ask you to cook the poitan as always. Toor Deen and I will chop up the meat.”

We would handle the lion’s share of the prep work in the morning, so we just took care of what was necessary on the day before.

Thanks to the experimentation being undertaken by the house of Daleim, it was determined that poitan kept just fine when made into a powder, so it had become common to boil down enough for several days at once. Plus, it didn’t get all dry and hard after a day like fuwano, so there was no issue with always cooking it the night before like this.

“What should I teach everyone today...? Do you have any requests, Toor Deen?” I asked while cutting the giba meat we had left at the Ruu house into blocks.

“Hmm...” the girl replied with a cute tilt of her head. “I think what I want to learn most is how to use new ingredients. I believe I’ve learned fairly well how to handle tau oil and sugar, but I still have no idea what to do with mamaria vinegar or panam honey.”

The ingredients that had begun circulating throughout the post town were now flowing into the forest’s edge too, bit by bit. Seasonings in particular could have a dramatic impact on a dish’s flavor with just a small amount, so the women of the forest’s edge eagerly welcomed them.

And through the Fa clan’s business connections, the Deen, Sudra, and Fou were able to purchase those seasonings. As small clans, the Sudra and Fou had trouble purchasing aria and poitan up until just a short while ago, so that was yet another big change.

“Let’s see. I don’t know many ways of using panam honey other than to make sweets either. As for mamaria vinegar, aside from the sweet and sour giba, I’ve just used it in condiments like sweetened vinegar, ketchup, and mayonnaise.”

“I see. So even you haven’t been able to find very many uses for them...”

“Yeah. Of course, I’m sure there’s lots of dishes they could be used in, but that’s all I’ve been able to come up with so far.”

As we had that exchange, it suddenly started getting noisy outside.

I figured maybe the men had returned from their giba hunting early, but that turned out not to be the case. It was in fact a man, but instead one belonging to the clans under the Ruu.

“Hey, is Morun back yet? The women in the main house said they hadn’t seen her, so could you please open this door!”

“Oh my, it’s dad,” Morun Rutim exclaimed, her eyes going wide.

After wiping her dirtied hands on a cloth, Vina Ruu headed over to the door leading outside.

“Ah, sorry for interrupting you all in the middle of your work!”

As soon as the door was opened, the Rutim clan head plodded on in.

He still wore the same wide grin as always, but Dan Rutim was supporting himself on a sturdy-looking grigee cane and holding his right leg up off the ground. That was because he had injured it around when we reopened for business.

Apparently he had fallen from a cliff and dislocated his ankle, then walked on that hurt leg for several hours while carrying an injured comrade, so he had done serious damage to his muscles in the process. Despite all that, he would supposedly recover just fine given time, but it was definitely painful to look at.

The man himself looked quite energetic, though, and was taking the opportunity to ride the totos the Rutim had recently purchased all around every day.

“What is it, dad? Do you need something from me?”

“Yeah! From you and Donda Ruu! But Donda Ruu probably won’t be back before the sun starts setting, so I figured I’d handle my business with you first!” Dan Rutim replied as he leaned up against the wooden wall. “You see, the hunters we lent to the settlement up north have returned. Apparently, starting today, the clans up north have gone on break. So the hunters we had been hosting in the Rutim settlement are also heading back home.”

“Huh...? Then it’s finally time for us women to take our turn?”

The Rutim clan and the settlement to the north had each exchanged three of

their hunters in order to teach bloodletting, as well as how to remove and wash organs.

Although the final decision about our businesses in the post town had been put off till next year's clan head meeting, Gulaf Zaza had finally accepted the idea of bringing delicious meals into the lives of all the people of the forest's edge.

And now that the men were finished learning, it was finally time for the women. If they were entering a break period, that made for perfect timing.

However, Dan Rutim shook his head, "No," with a blank look on his face. "Just like Darmu and Ludo Ruu said in the past, they built their houses up north right near the giba's territory. Thanks to that, women there have to be cautious of giba and mundt even in the middle of the day, so we can't loan them Rutim women like that."

"Huh? Then...what will we do?"

"Hrmm. Well, they're going to use this break period to clear out a bit more of the area around their settlement and get things ready to keep away the beasts. That's why we'll have to wait to send any of you to them, probably till after the break period ends in half a month."

"Oh, so that's the plan..." Morun Rutim murmured with a dejected slump of her shoulders.

I didn't know the circumstances there, but she seemed to desperately want to go to the northern settlement. That would create a gap in the stall staff, but from what I heard, her sister-in-law Ama Min Rutim would take over on that front.

"And the other matter is something I wanted to tell Donda Ruu, but could I leave a message with you instead as the eldest daughter of the main house, Vina Ruu?"

"Yes, what is it...?"

"Apparently before we exchange those women, they want to send over a single woman from the Dom clan during the break period. They don't care if it's the Ruu or the Rutim who take her in, but we'll need Donda Ruu's permission

either way as the leader of our clans.”

“Hmm...? What exactly is that woman coming here for...?”

“I don’t really know, but apparently she’s passionate about wanting to improve her cooking skills. And if she’s willing to go off and stay with some other clan all on her own, she sure must have some guts.”

As Dan Rutim chuckled, Yamiru Lea and Toor Deen shared a look next to me.

“Is there really a woman up north who places such importance on manning the stove...?”

“Hmm. That’s kinda hard for me to believe.”

They had both been born into the Suun, so they were also previously residents of the north.

Still, the Zaza, Dom, and Jeen hunters from up in that area were known for their dauntlessness and the giba pelts and skulls they wore atop their heads. The only ones I knew by name were Gulaf Zaza and Deek Dom, who were both large and intense enough to be a match for even Donda Ruu.

Just what exactly are the women up north like, though? They aren’t hunters, so I don’t think they’d wear any pelts or skulls on their heads, but still...

At any rate, I mentally prepared myself so I wouldn’t be surprised no matter how daunting of a woman showed up.

“If Donda Ruu approves, then I’ll go take the tolos and tell the folks up north what’s going on. So make sure to pass that along, all right?!”

“I understand... Are you leaving already, Dan Rutim...?”

“Yup! I promised Rau Lea we’d have a tolos race when he gets back from the forest, after all!”

At that, Morun Rutim and Yamiru Lea both sighed in sync. It was the shared modest lament of those stuck with overly simple-minded clan heads.

As that thought ran through my head, Dan Rutim suddenly turned to face me.

“By the way, Asuta, I named my tolos Mim Cha. It’s a good name, isn’t it?”

“Mim Cha, is it? Sounds cute.”

“Cute? It means ‘tomorrow’ in the eastern tongue, apparently.”

“‘Tomorrow,’ huh?”

“Yup. Your name means the same thing, right? So I took that in mind and named it Mim Cha. I’d have loved to give the name to another child if I had one, but I don’t exactly have any plans to marry again!”

And so, having left me at a loss for words, Dan Rutim hobbled on out of the kitchen.



It was now nighttime.

After finishing our dinner, with the main dish being the giba sweet sauce stew I was experimenting on, Ai Fa and I were relaxing under the light from the candle like we always did.

My clan head had let down her blonde hair and was seated leaning up against the wall. I sat facing her in a relaxed lounging posture.

“Well, anyway, I’d like to invite that Myme girl here to the forest’s edge. I should hear Donda Ruu’s response tomorrow morning, but still... What do you think, Ai Fa?”

“I don’t mind in the least, but I cannot say I’m especially fond of the thought of inviting a stranger into my home when I am not around.”

“Yeah, I was thinking it would be best to show our skills to one another by preparing dinner together. So I figured we could work on our cooking on the outside stove until you got back from hunting.”

“I see. Then I have no issue. We can have dinner together, and then I will escort her back to the Turan lands after that.”

Unexpectedly, Ai Fa was acting quite friendly toward Myme of Turan. It seemed she felt like she owed Mikel, thanks to the man telling Jeeda the location of the Turan manor. But, well, it was true that it was impossible to tell just what would have become of me if Jeeda and Mikel hadn’t been around, so I was certainly grateful to them too.

“Still, you didn’t so much as raise an eyebrow when I said Myme might be a

more skilled chef than me. That got Reina Ruu all in a huff.”

“I am not so narrow-minded of a person. The world is vast, so I could see how chefs even greater than you could exist out there,” Ai Fa replied, calmly staring back at me. “Besides, when it seemed like Reina Ruu was catching up to you in soup-making, you soon overtook her once again.”

“Umm...so are you saying even if Myme’s more skilled than me, I’ll probably catch up to her before long?”

“Can you accept the idea of a chef more skilled than you, Asuta?” Ai Fa asked, the look in her eyes unchanged. “Besides, you once said that having a worthy opponent helps drive you to further polish your skills. Or were those merely words?”

“No, I meant what I said, but still...”

“Then there is no issue.”

In the past, Ai Fa had been insistent that I create a more delicious soup than Reina Ruu, but now her gaze was full of absolute trust as she stared at me. That change made me feel glad, and proud too... At any rate, it seemed her belief that I wouldn’t let myself fall behind anyone else remained the same.

“I’ve got no intention of slacking in my training, naturally. But no matter how much free praise I’ve been given here at the forest’s edge or in Genos, I’m still ultimately just a chef in training.”

“Hmph. I know you simply mean to be modest, but you shouldn’t say such things outside this house, Asuta.”

“Huh? Why’s that?”

“You won in a taste comparison with a chef from the castle town, did you not? Deprecating yourself reflects even more harshly on the man who lost to you, doesn’t it?” Ai Fa said, calmly brushing aside her bangs. “It is not as if I’m satisfied with my own strength. But if I were to put myself down, that would mean doing the same to all those out there who do not manage to hunt as many giba as I do. I believe people should live with pride, rather than abasing themselves.”

“Right, and I’m proud of myself too.”

“I know that fact better than anyone. It’s rare to find someone who is so prideful and unhappy about losing,” Ai Fa stated, finally breaking out in a smile. “That is why I wouldn’t ever misinterpret your words, but there is a risk someone who is not as familiar with you would see them as an insult. That is why I’m warning you to watch your words out there.”

“I know. You seem a lot more solemn than usual today, somehow.”

“You make it sound as if I always act like a child,” Ai Fa retorted with a pout.

That was precisely the side of her that was childish, but both sides of her were precious to me, so there was no issue there.

“Still, you certainly do move from one thing to the next. Just when I felt things were finally settling down with regards to your business in the post town, now it’s a young girl with skills as a chef that equal yours, if not exceed them.”

“Yeah, but I guess that’s just what I should’ve expected from Mikel’s daughter. And I really did want to try his cooking, at least once.”

“That’s the first time you’ve said such a thing...”

“Really? Whenever Yang unveils a new dish, I always look forward to that too. Still, Myme’s cooking is something else entirely...”

In regards to Yang’s cooking, what I felt was more of a curiosity about the cooking of a chef from another country...er, world.

But with Myme...it was more of an admiration for someone who could make food that was purely delicious, regardless of her background or standing. I certainly didn’t have even the slightest feeling of hostility. However, I could feel a great heat rising up around my chest.

Perhaps it was a sense of camaraderie toward someone who had the same sort of sensibilities, or maybe it was joy at finding someone who I could have a friendly rivalry with that was on the same level.

“At any rate, I think meeting that girl was a good thing for you,” Ai Fa suddenly declared, as if she had seen right through what I was thinking. “So I would like to welcome her here as well. I look forward to the day that she

visits.”

“Yeah, just as long as Donda Ruu gives his permission... Anyway, I guess it’s about time we got to sleep, huh?”

“Indeed.”

After extinguishing the candle by the window, Ai Fa lay down right in front of me.

And then, she tightly gripped my hand.

“Don’t have any bad dreams tonight, Asuta.”

“I certainly would like to avoid it if I could, but it’s all down to luck.”

“No matter what nightmare you may see, I’ll be here by your side. If nothing else, never forget that fact.”

I could make out the calm sparkle in Ai Fa’s blue eyes amidst the darkness.

“There is nothing to worry about. You’re all right, Asuta.”

“Yeah.”

I gripped Ai Fa’s hand back just as tightly.

Everything was fine.

As long as Ai Fa was by my side, I would be okay.

Holding on to that one thought, I gently closed my eyes.

And on that night, I slept till morning without so much as a single nightmare.

Chapter 2: Woven Bonds

1

It was now the following morning.

I had finished the preparations for work without incident, and headed out to the Ruu settlement right on schedule.

And when Toor Deen and I arrived, we found Mia Lea Ruu there in front of the main house greeting us with a smile.

“We’ve been waiting for you, Asuta. Our clan head is here inside the house, so could we have just a bit of your time?”

“Huh? Donda Ruu got up this early and has been waiting for me?”

“Our clan head can wake up as early as needed when necessary. Well, not that I would call this especially early.”

Still, normally Donda Ruu would sleep in till around when the sun hit its peak. I had just expected him to leave me a message in regards to Myme, so I felt quite obliged as I stepped through the door.

“So you’re finally here, eh? Have a seat,” Donda Ruu called out, sitting cross-legged at the head of the table as always.

And I only felt more obliged as I noticed his three sons seated to his left and right, as well as Jeeda off to the side.

I really wasn’t expecting all this. Did I anger Donda Ruu or something?

He hadn’t fought back at all when I invited Shumiral as a guest, which was why I hadn’t been especially concerned about bringing up this matter regarding Myme.

Jiza, Darmu, and Ludo Ruu were all staring at me with the same sort of looks as usual. Jiza Ruu smiled with narrowed eyes, Darmu Ruu looked annoyed, and Ludo Ruu shot me a relaxed grin as I took a seat.

“I already heard everything from Mia Lea and Reina. You want to invite townsfolk here to the settlement at the forest’s edge again, right?”

“Y-Yes. Mikel, who you already know of, and his daughter Myme. Myme has said she wishes to observe my cooking skills...and I want to see her cook too.”

“Hmph...” Donda Ruu snorted.

Though he didn’t seem especially annoyed, the man was just as grave and intimidating as always. His blue eyes blazed bright, and as he rustled his mane of blackish-brown hair, he seemed like a lion staring at prey it didn’t particularly feel like eating.

“Jeeda, I’ve been told you met with that Mikel man. What sort of person would you say he is?” Donda Ruu asked.

“Hmm,” Jeeda murmured as he thought about it. The young yet formidable hunter of Masara had blazing red hair and unusual yellow eyes. “I only met him the once, so I can’t really be certain...but I’d say that he seemed resolute. After all, he wasn’t intimidated in the least when he saw me.”

Back then, Jeeda had been madly obsessed with revenge. And it was in the midst of a big uproar in which I had seemingly been kidnapped by the noble of Genos who was the target for his vengeance, so the boy definitely would have been even more unstable at the time.

“He must have suffered deeply, having that noble Cyclaeus twist the course of his life. If not, he probably never would have answered a question from someone as suspicious as me, even if I held a blade to him. But because he sensed I was also burning with rage toward Cyclaeus, he decided to lend me his aid.”

“Hmm? Then you didn’t tell him about yourself or anything, Jeeda?” Ludo Ruu asked, clearly curious.

“Of course not,” Jeeda shot back. “Why would I tell someone about that when I’d only just met them? All I asked was where I could find Cyclaeus.”

“I see. But how did you know that Mikel guy could tell you that in the first place? You never met him before, right?”

“He was furious when he went to the stall run by the Ruu women and heard Asuta was abducted. ‘That was why I told him not to get involved with that noble! Why didn’t he listen to my warnings?!’ and so on. Listening to him, I could tell he had ties with Cyclaeus, so I called out to him once he was alone.”

He certainly did have ties to Cyclaeus, but not in a good way. That vicious noble had wanted to hire Mikel as a chef, but when he was refused, he cruelly had the muscles in the chef’s arm severed.

When he heard Jeeda’s explanation, Jiza Ruu chimed in, “I see. Mikel was someone who knew of Cyclaeus’s crimes already, and he also has ties to Asuta, as well as the one who informed Asuta of him, Shumiral.”

“Right. When he heard that the people of the forest’s edge were fighting with Cyclaeus, Shumiral went out of his way to search for Mikel. And since Mikel currently lives in the Turan lands, his search must have stretched all the way over there,” I recalled.

Shumiral had met Mikel, Mikel had met Jeeda, and then all that had led to Jeeda setting the stage for me to be rescued from Lefreya. Thinking about all that, I really needed to be grateful for all of those different encounters.

“Shumiral sure was a friendly guy. Normally it’s hard to tell what easterners are thinking, but I was actually pretty fond of him,” Ludo Ruu said with a grin.

In response, Donda Ruu grumbled with a sour look, “Quiet, you.”

Shumiral had left Genos in order to carry out his work with his merchant group, but before that he had confessed his love for Vina Ruu. When he departed, Shumiral told us that if he made it back to Genos safely in half a year’s time, he would officially request to marry into her house. That certainly had to be a troubling matter for Donda Ruu as her father.

“We won’t get anywhere by chatting about people who aren’t even around these days. More important is that Mikel man. He can no longer man the stove himself, right?”

“Yes,” I confirmed. “Cyclaeus had the muscles in his right arm severed. But I’ve been told Mikel was a renowned chef in the castle town, and he seems to have passed on his techniques to his daughter Myme.”

“Hmph... Is she really that skilled of a chef?”

“She is. I sampled the dish she made with kimyuus, and I have to say that I believe she’s exceptionally talented.”

When I said that, Ludo Ruu leaned forward.

“You think she’s even more amazing at manning the stove than you are, right? That’s what Reina said last night.”

“Ah, yes. That was how it felt to me. But at any rate, I can say for sure, that dish was shockingly good.”

“I find that hard to believe. I mean, she’s still just ten or so, isn’t she? A little kid like that could never be better than you.”

It wasn’t just Ludo Ruu, as Jiza and Darmu Ruu were also suspiciously furrowing their brows.

And in the midst of all that, Donda Ruu solemnly asked, “So, those words are no joke, then? Reina also seemed upset, saying that such a thing simply wasn’t possible.”

“That’s because I’m the only one who tried her cooking. I can certainly see how it would be rather hard to believe through words alone. And that’s exactly why I wanted to have everyone else taste her cooking too...”

At that, the Ruu clan head and his sons exchanged some serious looks. Still not really sure what was passing between them, I just held my tongue, but then Jeeda chimed in from next to me.

“What’s going on? You all seem awful suspicious of Asuta’s words. Is it really that hard to believe what he has to say?”

“I mean, we’re talking about Asuta here. It just doesn’t seem possible for such a little kid to make food even more delicious than he does.”

“Hrm... Even so, I don’t really get what you guys are acting so serious for,” Jeeda commented with a tilt of his head. Though the young hunter still wore a piercing gaze and stern expression, the gesture was as cute as you’d expect from someone his age. “In fact, you look even more serious than when we were discussing Mikel. Was the real reason you summoned Asuta here because you

wanted to ask about this Myme girl instead?”

“Hmm? I mean, anyone would be curious after hearing something like that, right? And we know how skilled Asuta is better than anyone!”

“But wouldn’t it be normal to be more concerned with finding out about Mikel and Myme first? I mean, they’re going to be coming here to the settlement in the middle of the day, while the men are all out hunting giba.”

“There’s no way an older man whose right arm doesn’t work and a little brat of around ten or so could do anything to women of the forest’s edge. If they tried, Vina could just kick them in the butts and send them running,” Ludo retorted.

I was well aware of just how surprisingly powerful Vina Ruu was despite looking like sex appeal incarnate. Actually, the women of the forest’s edge were generally quite strong.

“Then why not take them at their word and invite them here to the settlement at the forest’s edge? Unless you do, and actually try her cooking for yourselves, you’ll never know just how skilled that Myme girl really is,” Jeeda stated, sounding rather exasperated.

“Hmm...” Donda Ruu grumbled as he fiddled with his beard. “Asuta, you’re planning to invite them to not just the Fa house, but here to the Ruu settlement too, right?”

“Ah, yes. I know Reina Ruu and the others are interested in Myme’s cooking, so I was thinking we could give it a try together...”

“Then I leave the rest up to the women. This has nothing to do with us.”

As I blinked in surprise, I called out, “Um...then does that mean I have your permission to invite Mikel and Myme to the forest’s edge?”

“Did you ever hear anyone say you couldn’t...?”

“No, not at all! I’m just glad to have your okay.”

Slowly, Donda Ruu rose to his feet.

“Then go ahead and get back to your work already. I’m going to go sleep a bit more, myself.”

“Right. Thank you very much.”

For some reason, I couldn't help but feel a bit let down somehow as I exited the Ruu house.

When I left through the front door, Toor Deen came running over from next to the wagon, where she had been waiting.

“I-Is everything all right, Asuta? You were in there for quite some time, so I was concerned.”

“Yeah, it's fine. I got permission to invite Mikel and Myme here.”

“Ah, I'm glad to hear it. I couldn't help but worry that you had earned the leading clan head's rage or something.”

“Yeah, I thought so too at first.”

But instead, it turned out everyone had just been interested in hearing about how I said Myme was a more skilled chef than I was.

Just a few months back, they used to say there was no good or bad taste when it came to food... Well, that's certainly a happy change from my point of view, though, I thought to myself, then I went ahead and gave Toor Deen a smile.

“Looks like our departure got delayed a good bit there. Is Yamiru Lea already in the wagon? If so, then let's hurry on over to the post town.”

With a bashful smile, Toor Deen nodded back, “Right.”

2

At last, we made it to the post town.

Thanks to the unexpected delay, we ended up in quite a rush to open for business.

Since the Fa clan was in charge of delivering the meals and fresh meat to the inns today, I left transporting the stalls to Yamiru Lea and the members of the Ruu clan, then headed to The Sledgehammer first.

“Ah, Asuta, I've been waiting for you. My apologies, but I'm a bit busy here so I cannot come greet you.”

As I carried my luggage into the kitchen, a seriously spicy aroma filled my nostrils. Apparently, the owner, Nail, was in the middle of cooking already despite how early in the day it was.

“That’s a nice smell you’ve got going. So you’re already preparing meals?”

“Yes. I had a bit of an idea, and so I’ve been testing it out. If you don’t mind, would it be possible to have you give it a taste test?”

That proposal was just what I had hoped to hear. Ever since it became possible to purchase a greater variety of ingredients throughout the post town, Nail had been striving to develop new dishes each and every day.

What he had boiling now was supposedly kimyuus meat and vegetables. The Sledgehammer was an inn frequented by easterners, who tended to prefer strong spices, and so the contents of the pot gave off a truly powerful aroma.

After scooping up a bit of that broth onto a small wooden plate, he held it out toward me. It was transparent, with a thin film of fat on top. And as I put it in my mouth, a striking spiciness hit me hard.

“This sure is spicy. But it definitely has quite a bit of depth, and it’s tasty too.”

“Thank you. Last night a customer shared some of an unusual herb from Sym with me, and so I tried pairing it with chitt seeds.”

Nail kept his expressions flat like an easterner, but I could still spy some satisfaction vaguely showing on his face.

As she took a sip of the same dish, Toor Deen let out a weak, “Ugh... M-My apologies, but it seems this dish is a bit too spicy for me...”

“It is all right. Even most westerners would find this too spicy. As it is ultimately a taste meant for customers from the east, perhaps there is no helping that,” Nail replied, not looking offended in the least as he stirred the pot. “I’m certain this flavoring would match well with giba meat too. I was thinking I would see how it was received with this kimyuus dish, and then if that works out, give it a try with giba.”

“Right. I’ll look forward to hearing how it goes.”

After receiving our payment for the meals and fresh meat we delivered, Toor

Deen and I left The Sledgehammer.

And as I led Gilulu by the reins, we headed toward our next stop, The Great Southern Tree. It was a splendid inn, located off to the side of the main road running through the post town. The owner's wife was seated at the reception desk, and she guided us to the kitchen where Naudis was waiting.

"Ah, thanks for coming, Asuta. Could you leave everything on that table there?"

"All right. Are you preparing food...?"

"Yes, that's right. I was thinking of changing the proportion of tau oil and sugar in my simmered dish a bit, so I was giving that a try."

Naudis seemed overjoyed at being able to use plenty of sugar from Jagar, his father's homeland. And with a gentle smile on his bearded face, he tossed some firewood into the stove.

"If you don't mind, could I have you give it a taste test, Asuta? I would very much appreciate hearing your opinion."

"I'd be glad to."

The time to open the stalls was drawing near, but even so, my curiosity still won out. Once again, I gratefully accepted a small plate with a bit of broth.

Unlike the powerful impact of the previous dish, this one had a truly gentle flavor. The soy sauce-like tau oil and the sugar created a salty-sweet taste, and then the stock from the ingredients seeped into it.

"What do you think? It certainly isn't anywhere near the cubed giba meat stew you make, but I'm personally rather proud of it."

"Yeah, it's delicious. If it were me, though, I might want to add just a bit of fruit wine..."

"I see. I used quite a bit of sugar, but was it still not sweet enough?"

"No, it would be for the flavor, not the sweetness. I think that the taste of fruit wine would pair very well here."

"Ah, so that's why you've still been using fruit wine in the cubed giba meat

stew, even with sugar available. In that case, I'll also give it a try," Naudis replied with a joyful grin.

As someone especially concerned with the quality of the dishes he offered among the inn owners of the post town, he had been the first one to approach me about selling him giba cooking.

"Well then, this is your payment for the giba meat and dishes. I'll be counting on you all again tomorrow."

"Right, but tomorrow it will be the members of the Ruu clan delivering everything."

After a brief hello to Naudis's wife too, we left The Great Southern Tree. The Westerly Wind only purchased fresh meat from us every few days, so for today we headed to meet up with the rest of the group at the stalls.



As we walked down the street, Toor Deen called out, “Asuta, I thought that previous dish was tasty too. That inn owner is good at cooking, isn’t he?”

“Yeah. Naudis had a passion for cooking to start with, after all. Apparently he’s been in charge of the cooking at his place for quite some time now.”

“But you still think that Myme girl’s cooking is way tastier, don’t you?”

Without the slightest hesitation, I replied, “Yeah. It’s a little hard to explain, but Myme’s cooking...it’s special.”

“Special, huh...? If you don’t mind, could you explain what you mean?” Toor Deen very timidly asked.

She hadn’t brought up Myme at all yesterday, but had she just been refraining? After all, as someone every bit as passionate about delicious food as Reina and Sheera Ruu, there was no way she wasn’t interested in the girl.

“Let’s see... For example, Nail and Naudis have an advantage in that they have access to more ingredients than most. That’s because they were able to purchase rare ingredients from their customers, Nail from the east and Naudis from the south.”

“Right... If I remember correctly, you bought chitt seeds, dried milk, and tau oil from those inn owners, didn’t you?”

“Yeah. Cyclaeus had bought up most unusual ingredients to be had, but Nail and Naudis were purchasing them in secret for personal use. But, well, even then they weren’t able to get a hold of stuff like Jagar-made sugar or honey.”

As we walked along, Toor Deen enthusiastically nodded. And while we hurried along the path that was steadily growing more and more crowded, I continued my explanation.

“And Nail and Naudis have one more point in their favor too. It’s a little embarrassing to say this out loud, but, well...it’s me.”

“Right, your presence is a point in their favor, isn’t it?”

“Yeah. Lately we’ve been delivering the completed dishes to them, but in the past I used to prepare them in their kitchens. Thanks to that, Nail and Naudis had plenty of opportunities to see me, Reina Ruu, and Sheera Ruu cooking

giba.”

It wasn't as if I had taught them like I had with Milano Mas at The Kimyuus's Tail. But those two inn owners had enthusiastically watched as we cooked. And even after we started delivering completed meals, they would always give them a try under the guise of a taste test.

“As a result, I had quite a bit of impact on both Nail and Naudis. But that's not the case with Myme. Well, it seems like she took inspiration from me to use fruit wine, but other than that it was all the result of Mikel instructing her.”

“I see... So you say she's special because you weren't involved in her cooking...?” Toor Deen questioned, suddenly looking up. “But that Mikel man was a chef in the castle town, wasn't he? When you all ate cooking from the castle town, didn't you think it wasn't especially tasty?”

“Yeah. I guess I'd explain it as, some of it was good, but most just wasn't to our tastes,” I replied, recalling the dishes that had been prepared by the chef Timalo in the castle town.

Timalo's flavorings and cooking techniques were pretty out there, so we all had to struggle a good bit to get them down. He paired karon milk with sour herbs, and injected extra fat into karon meat... The only dish I could truly say was delicious was the vegetable dish made from a giant tarapa.

“But you think Myme's cooking is tasty, when she studied under Mikel?”

“That's right. The cooking I've had from the castle town used way too many ingredients and was a bit overly complex. But Myme's dish from yesterday only used salt and fruit wine for flavoring.”

Besides, I got the feeling that Myme wouldn't ever ruin the flavor no matter how many ingredients she used. That was more my intuition than logic, though. But that just went to show how splendid the dish Myme had prepared really was.

“I see... If you're saying all that, then this Myme girl really must be an incredible chef...” Toor Deen replied, then she looked up at me with an entreating gaze. “Umm... When Myme and Mikel are invited to the forest's edge, would it be all right for me to attend too...?”

“Yes, of course. I want everyone to give Myme’s cooking a try, so I certainly have no intention of leaving you out. Please, come and give it a shot.”

“Thank you,” Toor Deen said with a joyful grin.

It was the sort of charming smile that made me want to just reach out and pat her on the head. But since it was best to refrain from doing so with girls over the age of ten, I just grinned back instead.

“I’m sure Myme and Mikel will stop by again today. If she brings cooking again, would you like to try some?”

“No, if possible...I would like to taste a dish she made with giba...”

“Ah, that sounds nice. Since we’ll have the chance, how about we have her take a crack at making a dish like that?”

As we had that exchange, the stalls where everyone was working finally came into view. And as they were taking care of the prep work, there were already a large number of customers waiting. Somehow, it looked like even more than usual.

“You’re late, aren’t you? Were you planning on pushing all of the work onto me?” Yamiru Lea questioned with a chilly glare.

“Sorry,” I replied, bowing my head. It seemed she had borrowed Lala Ruu’s help to get things ready.

“It seemed like you weren’t going to make it in time, so I figured I would help out. You were late from the start today, so the customers were starting to get impatient,” Lala Ruu stated, then she shot Toor Deen a grin. “Everything’s ready now, so let’s give it our all again today!”

“Ah, r-right. Thank you, Lala Ruu.”

The two of them had gotten close a good while back at the clan head meeting. When Toor Deen had been burned by boiling water, Lala Ruu had helped her out.

The hostile relations between the Ruu and Suun from back then had since been wiped away, and Toor Deen had joined the Deen clan on top of that. The young girl had regained more and more of her natural emotions and started

helping out with the stalls, and no one in the Ruu clan was happier about that fact than Lala Ruu.

“Well then, shall we open for business?” Sheera Ruu asked with a smile, as she was in charge for today. She and Tsuvai had also finished the preparations over at the Ruu stalls, apparently.

And so, we began another busy yet satisfying day of work.

3

Myme and Mikel eventually showed up around the same time they did yesterday. And when Myme heard Ai Fa and Donda Ruu had given their permission, she was so overcome with emotion that she grabbed hold of my hands.

“Thank you! I never expected we would be given permission so quickly!”

As it happened, the custom to avoid touching members of the opposite gender unnecessarily was particular to the people of the forest’s edge. That was why Myme could grip my hands now, looking like tears of joy were about to start flowing from her eyes.

And next to her, Mikel gave a deep sigh, his brow clearly furrowed.

“So you really got permission, huh? You people of the forest’s edge are surprisingly lacking in caution.”

“It’s because you two would never cause the people of the forest’s edge harm,” I replied, then suddenly felt concerned with what Mikel might be feeling at the moment. “But, um, is it all right with you, Mikel? You aren’t worried about letting your precious daughter come to the settlement at the forest’s edge?”

“You lot have no reason to harm us either... I’m just ashamed of how restless this idiot daughter of mine can be.”

At that, Myme snapped back to her senses and turned toward Mikel.

“I’ll be all right! I swear, I won’t cause anyone any trouble! So is it okay, dad...?”

Mikel didn't respond.

"Please! I just *have* to watch Asuta cooking! It's the first time I've had food made by anyone but you that's moved me this much!"

After giving yet another sigh, Mikel glared back at his begging daughter.

"I'm telling you, I can't go foisting a tomboy like you off on other people all on your own."

"Yup, naturally! You're coming along too of course, dad!" Myme retorted, spreading both arms wide and hugging her father.

Mikel just turned away, a deeply displeased look on his face.

"Naturally, we want to invite both of you. I truly am honored to be able to welcome you to the forest's edge, Mikel."

"Hmph. I'll just be there to keep an eye out and make sure this tomboy doesn't go doing anything stupid," Mikel shot back just as bluntly as always.

And after having tightly hugged her father's bony yet solid frame, Myme turned back my way.

"Well then, when should we schedule it for? My dad shouldn't have any work tomorrow."

"Ah, really? On our end, we've got no problems with having you over whenever."

"Then tomorrow it is! That's all right, isn't it dad? Ooh, it's like I'm dreaming!"

Myme looked so blissful that just looking at her raised my spirits. I really was honored that she was so happy just from the thought of seeing me cook.

"Ah, if you don't mind, I have something I'd like you to taste test again! For today, I brought a karon dish!"

The dish in question was already sitting in the wagon. Once again, I had slipped away from the stalls for a bit to talk with the father-daughter pair.

I went ahead and pulled the container out of the woven basket, and sure enough it was piping hot. Just like with yesterday, she had used a clay container that really seemed to hold in the heat. And when I opened the lid, a sweet smell

once again filled my nostrils.

“Hmm, this one seems to be a lot like the dish from yesterday.”

The karon meat was still soaking in a thick red soup. Though the kimyuus meat from before had been swapped out, the color and smell of the soup seemed identical to yesterday.

Still, karon meat was akin to beef. Meanwhile, kimyuus was like chicken, and that alone was enough to cause a change in the overall aroma. And that richer smell from the karon meat was seriously getting my expectations up.

Still, this must be karon leg meat...

In the beginning of my time here, only karon leg meat had been sold in the post town. That restriction had since been lifted, but since torso meat cost more than double as much, I doubted many people were purchasing it. And besides, the stuff used here looked just like the karon leg meat I had seen at inns.

Karon leg meat didn't have any fat on it at all, and it was very sinewy in exchange, making it quite tough. In fact, it was so tough that you had to cut it as thin as possible when grilling it, or let it cook for quite some time when boiling.

Still, it had a richer flavor to it than kimyuus meat, and there was some appeal to the chewy texture. So my expectations were pretty high as I pressed the prepared wooden spoon up against the meat.

The meat had been cut into even slices, and it offered no resistance as the spoon dug right into it. It really was every bit as tender as the kimyuus meat from yesterday.

I brought it to my mouth along with some of the red soup...and I was struck by an indescribable flavor.

It really was fantastic. Even more so than yesterday's dish, in fact. The taste of the karon meat worked to accentuate the splendor of the soup even more. The sweetness of the fruit wine, with just the right amount of salt, and the smattering of grated vegetables... It was all in amazing harmony with the karon meat.

“Ah, this is fantastic... I had thought yesterday’s dish couldn’t be perfected any further, but this is even tastier.”

“Huh? Then yesterday’s dish was a failure. What exactly would you say was wrong with it?” Myme questioned with a serious look, pressing in close.

“Oh, no, there was nothing wrong with yesterday’s. This dish is just so wonderful...”

“But I prepared each of them according to the qualities of kimyuus and karon meat. So if today’s is tastier, then that means something went wrong with yesterday’s dish.”

I was definitely more than a little shocked to hear that.

“You adjusted the broth between yesterday and today? I was sure they must be the same...”

“The basics are all identical. But I tweaked the amount of ingredients and heating time a bit,” Myme replied, then she stopped and thought a little. “Karon meat, of course, has more flavor to it than kimyuus, so if you compared them it could make sense to see that dish as better. But kimyuus has a delicious flavor all its own, and I tried my hardest to fully draw it out... It seems I still need to give it more thought, though.”

“I’d say they’re both delicious... I’m sorry for the unnecessary comment there.”

“No, such impressions are just what I was looking for. It might have been an issue with the proportions I used. I’ll try out a variety of things when I get back home.”

When Myme looked up at me, she was once again wearing a cheerful smile. And I could spy a truly inquisitive mind shining behind her light brown eyes.

She really is something else. That passion of hers must be why she was able to make dishes on this level, I thought as I polished off the rest of the food.

Once I was done, I gave Myme a smile.

“Thanks for the food. It really was delicious. I’m looking forward to finally seeing your skills firsthand tomorrow.”

“I’m hardly able to contain myself even now!”

“In that case, I’d like to work out a rough schedule... Could I have you cook twice, Myme?”

“Of course. But why twice?”

“Once for the Ruu clan, since they’ve helped us out so much, and then again at the Fa house where I live. We always have people gather at the Ruu settlement for cooking study sessions, so I’d like you to participate there first.”

“A study session?! I’m really looking forward to it!” Myme replied with a beaming smile.

Meanwhile, Mikel just kept on frowning and looking like none of this was his problem.

“Then once that’s over, could I have you come to the Fa house to prepare a dish for dinner? I’ll make one too, of course, and then we can give each other’s a try for our meal. And once that’s done, my clan head said she will escort both of you back to the Turan lands.”

“Thank you! To not only get to see your skills firsthand, but even eat dinner together...I’m truly, deeply overjoyed!”

I grinned back while feeling much the same, but then I remembered something important we still needed to discuss.

“Oh, there’s one more thing I’d like to propose. If you don’t mind, could we have you cook with giba meat? The people of the forest’s edge don’t have much interest in karon or kimyuus meat, so I think they would appreciate that more.”

After looking dumbfounded for a moment, Myme once again grasped my hand.

“Y-You would let me cook giba meat? But it’s a good deal more expensive than karon leg meat or skinless kimyuus, isn’t it?”

“We have more than enough of it at the settlement at the forest’s edge, though. So much so that it’s cheaper for us if we’re the ones providing it.”

Myme’s eyes teared up as she shouted for the umpteenth time, “Thank you! I’ve always wanted to try cooking with giba meat! To think I’m going to get to

use such a wonderful ingredient... It really is just like a dream!”

“Then, do you want to take a bit of giba meat back with you to prepare for tomorrow? It’d be tough in a lot of ways to perform without any practice.”

“Ah, no! I don’t think I could improve much with just a single night of study! And I don’t want to waste such precious meat, so the opportunity to use some tomorrow is already plenty!”

If Myme was fine with that, then I didn’t have any objections.

“All right, then I’ll look forward to working together tomorrow. We run the stalls until the lower second hour, so could you arrive around then?”

“Understood! I’m really looking forward to it!”

Then, just like yesterday, Myme and Mikel bought giba dishes from the stalls and headed back to Turan.

As I watched Yamiru Lea hand over one completed giba meat poitan wrap after another to the wave of customers pressing in on her, I offered her an apology. “Sorry. I’ve had to leave the stall to you a lot today. You haven’t had any issues, have you?”

“No. Fortunately, no ruffians have attempted to threaten me with blades or anything of the like,” Yamiru Lea replied with a composed expression as she continued with her work. Since the sun was approaching its peak, the number of customers was only growing all the while. “So, did you indeed invite that father and daughter pair to the settlement at the forest’s edge?”

“Yes. They’ll be coming tomorrow. And she’ll be participating in our usual study session, so I hope you’ll look forward to it too, Yamiru Lea.”

“I’m nowhere near passionate enough about manning the stove to be excited about such a thing,” Yamiru Lea retorted, and then she suddenly sighed.

Her proud profile wore a sort of pensive-looking expression.

“What is it?” I asked.

Her reply came quietly. “It’s nothing. Just... It’s certainly difficult to think such a day would come, considering how the members of the Suun clan used to intimidate the townsfolk. Back then, we people of the forest’s edge were feared

every bit as much as giba.”

For a moment I was at a loss for words, but I soon smiled back. “That’s true. And everything is a result of the hardships the people of the forest’s edge have overcome. So let’s keep on working together and giving our all.”

After falling silent for a bit, Yamiru Lea shrugged her shoulders with a, “Hmph. It’s not as if I have any strength to lend anyone. I’m a weak, pathetic woman who cannot even carry a metal pot on her own.”

“That’s not true at all,” I replied, earnestly feeling that way.

And then, suddenly, there was a strange commotion coming from the street.

When I turned to look, I found a huge tolos-drawn wagon approaching from the north. It was a fine rectangular wooden vehicle, pulled by two of the massive birds. A soldier in formal armor and a helmet held the reins, and the body of the wagon was decorated with the emblem of a count’s house.

“Oh, my. Which noble is it today, I wonder?” Yamiru Lea sarcastically whispered.

There were currently only two nobles who would come to purchase food from our stalls: Polarth of house Daleim and Leeheim of house Saturas.

Showing no care for the commotion from the surrounding crowd, the tolos wagon came to a stop. The man who emerged was past middle age, holding a large bouquet, and flanked by two guards armed with blades.

The crowd in front of the stalls all ducked their heads and started to move aside, but the man gently called out, “Ah, everyone, please remain as you were. I have not come as a customer of this stall, so I ask that you pay me no heed.” After making that declaration, he came around to the side to speak to us. “My apologies for interrupting your work. Are there any members of the Ruu clan present?”

Lala and Sheera Ruu shared a look.

The norm in situations like this was for a member of the main house to take charge, however in this case Sheera Ruu was in charge of the stalls. After Lala Ruu whispered something to her with a frown, Sheera Ruu nodded and stepped

forward.

“Yes, I am a member of the Ruu clan, the eldest daughter of Shin Ruu’s house. My name is Sheera Ruu. What business do you have with me, exactly?”

“I am acting as an envoy of the first son of the house of Saturas, Sir Leeheim. If you would, I ask that you please deliver this bouquet to Lady Reina Ruu.”

At that, Sheera Ruu’s eyes opened wide.

“To Reina Ruu? She isn’t here in town today, though...”

“I am aware. Sir Leeheim is also busy with other affairs today and unable to leave the castle town, so I was dispatched to deliver this item,” the man said with a refined smile as he held out the bouquet. The colorful array of flowers were wrapped in truly expensive-looking silk. It was a magnificent collection of flowers like you would rarely see, not only at the settlement at the forest’s edge, but in the post town as well.

“These flowers are for Reina Ruu? My apologies, but what is the reason behind this gift? We have no custom of giving flowers at the forest’s edge for any occasion other than a birthday...”

“Sir Leeheim has been unable to visit this place for ten days now, so he wished to offer these flowers in apology. Please, go ahead and accept them without reservation.”

With a troubled look, Sheera Ruu turned to face Lala Ruu. With a heaving sigh, the younger girl gave an exasperated shrug of her shoulders.

“Very well... Then, for the time being, I will accept them,” Sheera Ruu stated with a listless smile as she took the flowers.

Seemingly satisfied, the older man gave a bow.

“Well then, please send Lady Reina Ruu our regards. And for now, I shall be excusing myself.”

And with that, the man and the two guards accompanying him got back in the tolos wagon. After seeing them leave, Sheera Ruu returned to the stall.

“Good work there, Sheera Ruu. What are you going to do with that bouquet, though?”

“For now, I have no choice but to take it back to Reina Ruu. After that, I suppose the decision will be up to Donda and Mia Lea Ruu.”

She must have decided she couldn't just reject a gift from a noble solely on her own discretion. And if I had been in her position, I'm sure I would have done the same.

“What exactly did they come for anyway? They didn't even buy a meal or anything,” Lala Ruu said while sticking out her tongue as she prepared giba burgers. Sure enough, if it were Polarth he would have ordered his underlings to purchase a bunch of giba dishes.

Well, not that Polarth would be sending a bouquet to start with.

Leeheim of house Saturas was one of the participants in the dinner party held in the castle town. But before he departed afterward, he stopped by to give his regards to us chefs from the forest's edge, which is when he seemed to catch feelings for Reina Ruu.

Roy and Welhide fell for her charms too, but for him to go and send a bouquet... I thought to myself, only for Yamiru Lea to whisper into my ear.

“Quite the troublesome individual has set his eyes on Reina Ruu. If she isn't careful, we could end up at war with the nobles again, wouldn't you say?”

“Well, yeah, that's true... But the heir to a count's house would never ask a woman of the forest's edge to marry him. So I'm sure it'll be just fine.”

Through the chain of hardships we had overcome, the people of the forest's edge really had formed ties with all sorts of people. Though most of those were things we could be glad for, I suppose it made sense that occasionally some people would have feelings that were not reciprocated.

Still, that's what it meant to open up to the outside world. You just had to keep clearing up any misunderstandings that arose one by one. And the people of the forest's edge had still only just gotten started down this new path.

If it comes down to it, we can always discuss the matter with Polarth or Marstein. So it really isn't the same as when it felt like we were surrounded on all sides by enemies, I thought as I laid out some fresh giba meat atop the tray.

And as the totos wagon from house Saturas departed for the castle town, the intimidated crowd got their nerve back and started returning to the stall.

4

There weren't any other incidents of note after that, and so we were able to safely finish out the day's business.

But when we returned to the settlement at the forest's edge and headed for the main Ruu house's kitchen, the bouquet from Leeheim naturally became a matter of discussion.

"That noble sent this for me? What in the world could he want?" Reina Ruu questioned with a greatly troubled look as she accepted the bouquet, having been working on preparations for tomorrow.



Unsurprisingly, Reina Ruu wasn't the only one troubled. Mia Lea Ruu and the others couldn't help but tilt their heads while they worked on their own tasks.

"You can't go accepting flowers when it's not even your birthday. Even more so when they aren't from family," Mia Lea Ruu stated, and then she turned toward Bartha. "Just what is this all about? Do you have any idea?"

"Huh? What are you asking me for? It's certainly nothing to brag about, but nobody's ever given me flowers in my entire life. Haven't given 'em to anybody either."

"But you were raised in a town, weren't you? Then you should at least be familiar with the customs of such a place."

With a shrug of her thick shoulders, Bartha chuckled, "Ha ha. I may have been born in Masara, but half of my childhood was up on the mountain. I suppose with stuff like this, don't you send them to someone you like?"

"Hmm, so that really was it, huh? Even I was able to guess that much..." Mia Lea Ruu said with a strained chuckle, unusual as that was for her. And then, she turned toward Reina Ruu. "Well, go ahead and put those flowers in water for now. We can just leave what comes next up to the clan head."

"Right... But since this goes against the customs of the forest's edge, wouldn't it be better to return them?"

"It's the clan head's job to decide that. It's not like he asked you to marry him, so you have nothing to worry about," Mia Lea Ruu replied with a laugh. "Just to be sure, even if that noble *did* ask you to be his bride, you wouldn't accept, right?"

"Of course not," Reina Ruu immediately replied, briskly and without the slightest hesitation. "Dad would never accept me marrying someone from the castle town, and even if he *did* give his permission, I wouldn't want to."

"Hmm, so that noble isn't especially charming?"

Mercilessly, Reina Ruu nodded back. "That's right."

By the way, Leeheim was an overly thin young man who always wore a faint, cynical-looking smile. It was difficult to say just what his true nature was like,

and he was the sort where it seemed like it would take some time till we could truly understand one another.

“Besides, there’s no way he would ever ask a woman of the forest’s edge to marry him in the first place. I can’t even imagine a noble of the castle town doing such a thing,” Reina Ruu continued.

“Right, and that man has a fairly high standing among nobles too, doesn’t he?”

“Yes. As the oldest son of a count’s house, he’s supposed to be quite important. So he’s probably just teasing me, right?”

“No, not at all,” Bartha interjected. “It hasn’t been that long since the lord of Genos declared that proper bonds should be formed between the nobles and you people of the forest’s edge. So there’s no way one of them would mess with you at a time like this.”

“Then you’re saying this noble actually wants to marry me?”

“Nah, he’s probably just expressing his affection for you; it’s nothing as serious as what you’re thinking. I’d imagine most men out there would be fond of a looker like you, after all.”

Though Bartha’s claim was completely obvious, it was a notion that would be difficult for the people of the forest’s edge to accept. After all, to them, love affairs between men and women were directly tied to marriage.

Seeming to not fully grasp the matter even still, Reina Ruu glanced down at the bouquet in her hands.

“I’ve got a bad feeling about this somehow... Hey Asuta, that Leeheim noble is the one who tried to buy up lots of giba meat, isn’t he?”

“Ah, yeah, that’s what I was told.”

“I don’t want to believe this could be true...but he wouldn’t have raised that idea in order to put the people of the forest’s edge in his debt, right?”

“I really can’t figure that’s the case. I think he just simply recognized the value of giba meat as a product to be sold.”

Still, ultimately Duke Marstein Genos put a stop to that. Now, after the price

of giba had been reevaluated, we were observing to see what impact that would have on the sales of karon and kimyuus meat.

“Like I said, it’s nothing for you to worry yourself over. Just leave such difficult topics up to the clan head. I’m sure he’ll settle everything smoothly,” Mia Lea Ruu stated with a bright smile as she patted Reina Ruu on the head.

Looking embarrassed at being treated like a child, Reina Ruu shrugged her shoulders and replied, “Yeah...”

“We’ll never understand what nobles are thinking, no matter how much we try. We just have to keep on carrying out our own work. And the longer we keep dawdling about, the less time Asuta has to help instruct us.”

And so, under Mia Lea Ruu’s orders, work recommenced.

Meanwhile, my group also started with preparations for tomorrow.

While I cut up the giba meat along with Toor Deen, Reina Ruu seemed to get her spirits back and called out, “By the way, did you manage to talk to Myme and Mikel?”

“Yeah. I ended up inviting them to the settlement at the forest’s edge tomorrow. We’ll be stopping by the Ruu settlement first, so we’ll see you then.”

“Oh, really? I’ll be looking forward to it.”

While Toor Deen had seemed overjoyed, Reina Ruu now wore a serious expression. Since she was still doubtful of Myme’s skills, she saw it as a chance for the girl to show what she could do.

Still, if Reina Ruu acknowledges Myme’s cooking, then this is sure to get her seriously excited. Especially since, unfortunately, she found Timalo’s cooking to be such a letdown.

It had been quite a surprise for Reina Ruu when she first tasted the cooking from Yang’s stall in the past. And since she was so much more passionate about delicious food than most, meeting Myme was sure to be huge for her.

“By the way, it seems like we’ll be able to have Myme prepare a dish with giba meat, so if you don’t mind, I’d love to have everyone give it a try,” I commented.

“Ooh,” Mia Lea Ruu said with her eyes going wide. “So a girl from town is going to cook with giba meat? That certainly is something to look forward to.”

“Right, though there are already inn owners from the post town who cook with it.”

“Things sure have changed a lot in just a few short months... By the way, Dan Rutim showed up again today, before he headed out to the northern settlement.”

“The northern settlement? Oh, that business about taking in a Dom woman, right?”

“Yeah. That ended up getting approved too. Preparations on their end will take a couple days, and then she’s supposed to be brought here to the Ruu settlement,” Mia Lea Ruu replied with an amused smile. “A girl from town is being invited to man our stove, and we’re welcoming a member of the Dom clan into our homes. Just a little while ago, all of it would have been impossible to imagine. And then there’s the noble sending flowers too.”

“That thing with the noble isn’t exactly anything to be happy about, though,” Reina Ruu retorted in a sulky tone, but her mother just kept on smiling and shook her head.

“That may make for a bit of a hassle, but we’re still talking about someone liking you. So in the end I’d say that’s something to be happy about. After all, up until now none of us but the leading clan heads had so much as glanced at a noble.”

“But still...it really won’t be happy news if it leads to some sort of quarrel.”

“What’s a bit of a quarrel matter anyway? We’ve been granted much greater happiness than something like that could ruin. And regardless, it’s not like we can avoid every little issue as we keep moving forward, so we just have to keep on following whatever path we think is best.”

“I agree,” I chimed in without thinking, earning me a reproachful look from Reina Ruu.

“That sort of makes me sound like an unreasonable child or something.”

“Ah, no, I really do feel sorry for you, Reina Ruu.”

“Whatever,” the girl retorted, turning away.

While it was a very adorable response, I really did feel apologetic toward her. I mean, if some noble’s daughter went and gifted me flowers out of nowhere, I wouldn’t exactly be happy about it either.

“At any rate, our visitors tomorrow come first. And I’m certainly looking forward to seeing what sort of dish she’ll prepare, Asuta.”

“Right. I definitely am too.”

By this time tomorrow, Myme and Mikel would already be standing here in this space. Just imagining it was enough to get me all excited. And I was elated not just due to my personal interest in Myme, but also the fact that there were townsfolk being invited to the settlement at the forest’s edge as guests.

Chapter 3: Visitors to the Forest's Edge

1

At last, the day had arrived. It was the twenty-first of the black month, when we would be welcoming Mikel and Myme to the forest's edge as guests.

Before all that, though, we had to safely conclude our business in the post town. At any rate, I went ahead and suppressed my excitement as best I could as I carried out the day's work.

We did happen to have a somewhat unusual customer right after we finished with the initial morning rush when we opened. Which is to say, it was the first time in a while the head chef for the house of Daleim, Yang, had visited our stalls.

"It's been some time, Sir Asuta."

"Yeah, long time no see, Yang. What business brings you here today?"

Yang was an older man than even Mikel, and a skinny one at that. Though he tended to act rather stiff, he had an unusual amount of passion when it came to cooking.

After giving a polite bow, Yang then gestured toward the two women standing behind him.

"I have new workers at my stalls who I wished to introduce to you, so I came to the post town a touch early."

They were both young women with refined features fitting for residents of the castle town. One of them was a bit tall and seemed very earnest, while the other had a small build and a willful look about her. The former seemed to be around my age, while the later was probably around two or three years younger.

"This is Sheila, an attendant for Lord Polarth; and this is Nicola, who started working at the Daleim manor the other day."

The older girl was Sheila, while the younger one was Nicola. They both bowed their heads, Sheila timidly and Nicola sulkily.

“I’m Asuta of the Fa clan, a person of the forest’s edge. Pleased to meet you both.”

That said, I didn’t know the names of anyone who had worked at Yang’s stall up till now, and I only ever stopped by when he was debuting a new dish. I couldn’t imagine us becoming particularly close from here on out either...but then Sheila spoke up and said something unexpected.

“Um, Sir Asuta...is your clan head Lady Ai Fa in good health?”

“Huh? How do you know Ai Fa’s name?”

“Well...the truth is, before Lord Polarth took Lady Ai Fa to the Turan manor to rescue you, at one point we had a chance to talk in the Daleim manor,” Sheila replied, her cheeks blushing red for some reason. “I’m certain Lady Ai Fa has no memory of my name or face...but every day, I pray to the four gods that she remains in good health.”

“Oh, really? Thank you for that.”

If she had a positive impression of Ai Fa, then that was a good thing.

At any rate though, I entrusted the stall to Yamiru Lea and then stepped over in front of Yang’s group.

“Oh, right, the thing is, today we invited Mikel and his daughter Myme to our house at the forest’s edge.”

“What’s this now? Why is Sir Mikel going to your house, Sir Asuta?”

“Um, it’d take a little too long to explain fully, but to sum it up, Myme has an interest in my cooking skills. And Mikel’s more just reluctantly accompanying her.”

“I see... So Sir Mikel is coming to your home...”

Yang was also someone who had known Mikel back when he was a chef. And there was this one occasion when the two of them had a chance meeting at my stall. Looking back on it, Yang had started opening up to me after that chance meeting.

“Sir Mikel was a truly splendid chef. He served for some time as the head chef of The Maiden in White, a small restaurant renowned for the high quality of its cooking,” Yang said with an uneasy sigh. “But then he met with such a fate just for catching Count Turan’s attention... How could anyone do something so brutal as to sever the muscles in a chef’s arm? I simply cannot fathom it.”

“I certainly agree with you there... Now that I think about it, just how long has it been since that terrible thing happened to him?”

“It was roughly five years ago now. At the time, I was confident that he was easily among the top three chefs in the castle town.”

Five years ago... Ever since then, Mikel had been driven out of the castle town and kept on living in the Turan lands making charcoal.

When I first met him at The Sledgehammer, Mikel had been dead drunk in the middle of the day. And then he shouted at me that if I wanted to live as a chef, I shouldn’t remain here in Genos. Just how had he felt, raising such a young daughter...? Someone my age could surely never even begin to imagine.

“If she happened to receive instruction from Sir Mikel, that girl must also be quite a skilled chef. Is she still young, though?”

“Yes, she’s apparently just ten years old.”

“Is that so? Perhaps Sir Mikel has started seriously attempting to raise his daughter as a chef now that the former head of the house of Turan has been judged. I certainly look forward to seeing how her future plays out.” Then with yet another pensive sigh, Yang bowed his head. “And I want to strive at my own work so that I will not fall behind. At any rate, my apologies for interrupting you during such a busy period.”

“Ah, not at all. Thanks for coming all this way.”

With that, I returned to the stall for the giba meat poitan wraps.

And as I did so, Rimee Ruu called out, “Hey, Asuta,” from the neighboring giba burger stall. “That was that chef from the castle town, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah, it was Yang, the head chef for the house of Daleim. Apparently the girls with him are starting work at his stalls today.”

“I see. That girl kinda had a sad look on her face, didn’t she?”

“Huh? You mean the tall one?”

“No, the other smaller girl.”

Ultimately, Nicola hadn’t said so much as a single word.

I had just thought of her as being strong-willed, but it seemed that Rimee Ruu had a different impression. But, well, I was known to be a terrible judge of these things, so Rimee Ruu was probably right.

“Well, you never know what life may hold... Ah, sorry for shoving everything on you when things are so busy, Yamiru Lea.”

“I don’t especially mind. Three customers didn’t draw lots though, so could you remove that many?”

“Right, got it.”

Since there were the same number of losing sticks as total meals prepared, whenever customers didn’t draw a lot we had to remove that many. And currently, there seemed to be around half left of the special item, the giba cutlet sandwich, or about fifteen.

“Ah, it’s Tara! Yay, welcome!”

“Oh, Rimee Ruu! Long time no see!”

That exchange marked the arrival of Dora and his beloved daughter Tara.

Perhaps it went without saying, but when Rimee Ruu was granted permission to help with business in the post town, Tara was just as ecstatic as the girl herself. And so, she now stood between the stalls with a big grin on her face.

“I brought a basket since we’re buying a whole lot today! Um, we’ll take five poitan wraps, two each of the giba burgers and giba manju, and one myamuu giba!”

“Whoa, that really *is* a lot!”

“Yeah! On top of buying for me and dad, the cloth and pot sellers asked us to get them some since they were busy, and so did Granny Mishil and someone from one of the inns! And dad and the pot seller eat two poitan wraps each.”

“I see. Well, thanks a ton. And what should we do about the giba cutlet sandwich lots?”

“We’ll pull for all of them! I’m sure dad and the pot seller wanted two poitan wraps so they could draw twice.”

Even so, the odds of drawing a winner were roughly one in thirteen. And so, it was up to Tara’s luck to determine how many she could draw when pulling for ten meals.

“I hope you get a winner!” Rimee Ruu said with a smile as she held out the wooden sticks.

“For dad! For the pot seller!” Tara excitedly proclaimed as she pulled the lots one by one. It really was adorable how the corners of her eyes drooped whenever she took a look.

Still, she just didn’t seem to be pulling a winner. But at long last, Lady Luck finally smiled on Tara right at the end.

“For Granny Mishil!” she shouted as she pulled the tenth stick, which finally had a red mark on it. After staring dumbfounded, she leapt up in the air with a “Hooray!”

“That’s good. But it’s bad luck for you, isn’t it, Tara?”

“No! Granny Mishil likes the giba manju more than the oily giba cutlet sandwiches, so she said I could have it if she won!”

“Really?! Then I’m happy for you!” Rimee Ruu replied, now bouncing along.



It was just so adorable that I couldn't help but break out in a smile.

"Well then, I'll change out one of the poitan wraps for a giba cutlet sandwich. The price is now three red coins, so is that all right?"

"Yes, please!"

With that, I went ahead and made the four poitan wraps I was in charge of preparing. And as the other stalls finished up one dish after another, the woven basket Tara had prepared continued to fill up.

"Oh, right! Don't you have to let Tara know about that thing, Asuta?" Rimee Ruu questioned, jogging my memory.

Tara then looked at me and Rimee Ruu in confusion. "You have something to tell me?"

"Yeah, the thing is, we actually have two acquaintances from Turan coming today to visit the settlement at the forest's edge."

"Ooh, really?! I'd sure love to go too..."

"You said something like that before, didn't you? That's why I wanted to make sure to let you know." Tara just tilted her head, looking like she didn't quite get it. "I mean, tensions were still high with the nobles back then, so we couldn't invite you because it was too dangerous. But that was a month or so ago and circumstances have changed... Do you still want to come play at the forest's edge, Tara?"

"Yeah! But mom and everyone said I can't..."

"I see. Well, it's no longer especially dangerous, but I suppose since there are still giba and mundt around, it's not exactly the sort of place you can visit casually just to play," I said, then I bent down and looked straight into Tara's eyes. "But there's no danger coming and going there in a wagon, and giba and mundt don't show up around the Fa or Ruu houses during the day, so it really isn't scary at all. That just leaves the question of whether your mom would be okay with sending you off, I'd say."

"Yeah..."

"So I figured, why not try chipping away at her reluctance about whether you

and Dora can come visit the settlement at the forest's edge together at some point. I get the feeling the people of the forest's edge and the townsfolk have started getting a lot friendlier with one another over this past month and change, so if we can all come to understand each other just a bit more, I'm sure you'll be able to come play."

"Right," Tara nodded. There was an even firmer look of understanding shining in her eyes now than I had expected.

Up until just a few months ago, Tara had been one of those townsfolk who was terrified of the people of the forest's edge. So it wasn't like I couldn't understand how the people close to her could be so concerned.

"Today's visitors to the forest's edge are actually a girl just a bit older than you and her father. Why not try telling your mom and dad about how folks like that are now able to visit the forest's edge? That story's sure to help them feel more at ease."

"Yup, I will. Thanks for doing so much for me, Asuta."

"Nah, it's just that Rimee Ruu and I really want to invite you to the forest's edge too. Right, Rimee Ruu?"

"Yeah! And I'd love to come play at your house too!"

A joyful smile spread on Tara's face. "It really would be nice if that could happen."

"It sure would."

"Yup."

"Uh-huh."

The girls from the forest's edge and post town were staring at one another, their eyes sparkling brightly.

Maybe what us grownups needed was to face one another head-on like that.

Kamyua Yoshu once said that it wasn't particularly as if he wanted to see the hunters of the forest's edge and the townsfolk coming together and joining hands...but I did. As someone who held folks from both of those groups close to my heart, I couldn't imagine a better result.

As we started cleaning up after finishing our work with the stalls, Mikel and Myme showed up just as promised at the lower second hour.

“I look forward to working with you today, Asuta!” Myme declared, her flushed cheeks soon disappearing from view as she took a deep bow. In her slender hand she held some sort of huge leather container. The thing had a rectangular shape to it, and kinda reminded me of a suitcase. Though it appeared to be quite old, the hinges and handle were made of metal, so it was likely a pretty high-class item.

“Yeah, me too. Do you have your cooking tools in that container...?”

“Yes. My dad handed them down to me.”

The dad in question, Mikel, wore a seriously sour look on his face again today.

If they were to have a competition for the grumpiest face around, either Mikel here or Milano Mas would be nominated as this town’s candidate for sure. And it’d definitely make for an exciting match when Donda Ruu or Gulaf Zaza was nominated for the forest’s edge.

“Well then, could we have you hop into the wagon and wait? We still have to do our shopping and visit the money exchange. And Mikel, you come over here too.”

At my prompting, Mikel followed me off to the side.

Just what exactly did he think about his daughter saying she wanted to observe me cooking at the settlement at the forest’s edge? While he didn’t seem strongly opposed, he also didn’t appear all that happy about it either.

“So we’re heading to the Ruu clan’s settlement first?”

“Yeah. The Ruu are one of the leading clans of the forest’s edge. And they’ve all been looking forward to your arrival, Myme.”

“Right! I’ll try my hardest not to let them down!” Myme replied, her eyes filled with anticipation as she got into the wagon.

Just what sort of dish would Myme prepare with giba meat? My heart was

beating like I was a young maiden in love just at the thought.

But at any rate, we made it safely to the Ruu settlement.

As far as I knew, only a small handful of townsfolk had ever set foot in the settlement at the forest's edge. Kamyua Yoshu and his apprentice Leito, Shumiral who came as a guest of the Fa clan, and Jeeda and Barthia who were currently living at the Ruu settlement... They were all I could think of.

Aside from that, there were the two times, ten years ago and a few months back, we had merchant groups heading for Sym (or in the latter instance, people pretending to be one), but they didn't set foot in the settlement and simply went to cut through the forest instead. Plus someone sneaked into the Zaza settlement where Zuuro Suun was being held, and Lefreya and Sanjura came to the entrance of the Ruu settlement to talk to me, but I figured those could be treated as exceptions.

At any rate, it was an undeniable fact that it was incredibly unusual for anyone from town to be invited to the settlement at the forest's edge as guests.

Still, thanks to all that strife involving the house of Turan, Kamyua Yoshu and Leito had been continuously visiting, and currently Jeeda and Barthia were living here, so the folks at the Ruu settlement had surely built up a tolerance by this point. As I led the wagon into the plaza with the reins, there were women from the branch houses greeting us the same as always.

"We've arrived. Welcome to the Ruu settlement," I declared as I stopped in front of the kitchen behind the main house.

When she stepped down from the wagon, Myme went, "Ooh..." as she looked all around. "Amazing... We really are in the middle of the forest."

"Yeah. But there's nothing around here for the giba to eat, so you don't have to worry about them."

It was around then that Mia Lea Ruu approached, wearing a smile. "Good work, Asuta... And to our visitors from town, welcome to the Ruu house. I'm the wife of the main house's head, Donda Ruu, and my name is Mia Lea Ruu. I can't say I'm all that well versed on speaking politely, but still, I gladly welcome you both."

“P-Pleased to meet you! I’m Myme of Turan, and this is my father Mikel,” Myme said with a bow of her head, while Mikel just sort of absentmindedly tugged at his chin. And unsurprisingly, Mia Lea Ruu looked over the two of them with a smile.

“From what I can see, you don’t appear to have any weapons on you. But what’s in that big container? Ingredients? Or blades?”

“Ah, there are knives and spoons and the like in here to use in my cooking.”

“Then could you entrust that to me for just a moment while we go to the kitchen? At the forest’s edge, the custom is that guests need to enter a home without any blades on their person.”

While Ai Fa and I were granted exceptions, that was indeed the rule. But after looking uneasy for a moment, Myme handed the leather case to Mia Lea Ruu without a word.

“Thank you. You’re certainly a good girl, aren’t you? Well then, let me guide you to the kitchen... It’s over this way.”

Myme and Mikel headed off following Mia Lea Ruu’s directions. Meanwhile, we unloaded the luggage and set about cleaning the dirty trays and pans.

For today, the Ruu group consisted of Reina and Rimee Ruu, Tsuvai, and Morun Rutim. Since there had been a day in between, all the members were the same aside from Rimee Ruu.

Then there was the Fa group of me, Toor Deen, Yamiru Lea, and Li Sudra. When you added in Mia Lea and Sheera Ruu on top of that, it already made for a packed kitchen, so Bartha went ahead and passed on participating today.

“It’s finally time, isn’t it?” Reina Ruu murmured with a serious expression.

“I’ve been so excited for this!” Rimee Ruu said.

Then there was Toor Deen looking just a bit nervous, while everyone else seemed the same as always. In particular, Tsuvai and Yamiru Lea appeared to be totally uninterested.

“Well, first off we’ve got to handle the preparations for tomorrow, so please hold on for just a bit as we get that done.”

Myme's passionate gaze followed me as I stepped into the kitchen.

However, her eyes weren't locked on me. Instead, they were focused on the chunk of giba meat I carried out from the pantry.

"That's giba meat, right?"

"Yeah, this is half of a female giba. Male giba are wilder and are harder to capture in good condition, so most of the meat we use in our business comes from females."

I gently laid the dressed carcass that had been cleanly cut in half atop the work station. The ribs and spine and the like had all been removed, leaving behind a roughly twenty kilo chunk of meat. Since the legs were still attached, those had to be removed first. That job belonged to me and Toor Deen.

All the other women were already working away silently on their own tasks. And since this was daily work for us, they all knew what to do without needing me to hand out directions.

In the midst of all that, Myme's gaze remained fixed solely on me.

"We're cutting this up into parts now to make tomorrow morning's work easier," I explained as I sliced into the giba with my Jagar-made meat-cutting knife. "The taste and toughness of giba meat changes quite a bit depending on the part. The fat is spread throughout the back and chest, so it's suited to being thinly sliced and fried, while the legs have more concentrated fat that makes them better suited to be used in soup or minced up."

"I see. So what I've had from your stalls used back or chest meat, then?"

"Yeah, since we can't really serve soup dishes at the stalls. Now that I think about it, have you ever handled karon torso meat before, Myme...? I don't have experience with that, so I can't really compare it to giba meat."

"No, I've never used karon torso meat. All I've cooked with is karon leg meat and skinless kimyuus."

That was about what I had expected. Nowadays you could purchase any ingredient as long as you had the coins, but karon torso and kimyuus with the skin still attached were quite expensive, so they still weren't easily available.

But in that case, it meant that Myme had never once used properly fatty meat. I was just a bit worried if she would be able to properly prepare giba meat when I considered that.

Well, I'm sure she'll be fine. I mean, Mikel trained her after all, I thought to myself as we finished up with the preparations. Everything really did seem to be flowing smoother day by day.

With that out of the way, it was the time for the study session with the members of the Ruu clan. The plan was for both Myme and I to show off our skills during this period, but unsurprisingly I ended up going first.

“Well then, how about we review making tino rolls for today? It'd be good to get this down pat, since I'm hoping to share the work for The Kimyuus's Tail with the Ruu clan, starting in the next contract period.”

“Right. Thank you,” Sheera Ruu said with a dead-serious look in her eyes as she quietly bowed. And Reina Ruu did the same, not saying so much as a word.

It was no surprise that these two were more fired up than anyone by Myme's presence. After all, they were the most passionate about improving their cooking skills out of the whole Ruu clan.

“This dish is one that I offer at the inns. It involved wrapping finely-minced giba meat in tino and then boiling it. And I use tarapa as the base for the broth's flavor.”

“I see. So this is a different dish than those giba burgers you sell at your stalls?”

“Yeah. The steps to make them are a bit similar, but I'd say the dishes themselves are completely different.”

With that, we all set about making tino rolls, me to give Myme a sample to try, and everyone else for their own practice. Since the Ruu clan women had said they were planning on making extra to use for dinner, I turned to face Mia Lea Ruu, since she was in charge here.

“Er, this dish uses minced meat, so will Donda and Jiza Ruu be all right with it?”

“It’ll be fine. Tino rolls are those really juicy things, aren’t they? So it’s the same thing as sinking hamburger steak in soup, I’d say. Besides, even our clan head understands perfectly well how tasty minced meat can be by this point. After all, the taste is totally different between stuff like plain grilled or boiled meat and dishes like hamburger steak.”

“Oh really? Glad to hear it.”

“And anyway, lately we’ve been offering two or more different meat dishes as much as possible. So if we go with a thick steak for the other one, that should give his jaw and teeth enough of a workout, so he’ll be plenty satisfied and able to enjoy the dinner.”

Having been granted that permission, I set about making the tino rolls. Since the dish didn’t really use much in the way of new ingredients, I figured it would be well suited for Myme to taste test.

“Well then, first up comes prepping the ingredients. You finely mince up the giba thigh meat, along with any leftover scraps or bits still clinging to a bone that you might have lying around.”

“Right.”

“Once that’s done, you sprinkle on salt, pico leaves, and finely chopped myamuu, then knead it well until it feels nice and sticky. After that, you boil the tino in plenty of water, but you want to add salt to it first. You can use about one percent, er, one hundredth of the amount of water.”

“Why do you add salt to the water?”

“That helps keep the nutrients from escaping out of the vegetables, and also maintains color. Still, that was just the custom in my old country, so I don’t know how effective it is with tino. But it worked with any green vegetable back where I came from, at least.”

“You’re from overseas, aren’t you, Asuta?” Myme asked, her eyes brimming with curiosity. “The thought of meeting a chef born outside of this continent is enough to get me all excited by itself. I really do feel blessed to have run into a chef like you with so many unique techniques.”

“Ah ha ha, I’d consider it an honor if I managed to show you even a little.”

“No, really, by this point, you’ve already been an utterly irreplaceable influence in my life.”

Hearing that really did make me feel bashful. However, I was getting a pretty searing look from Reina Ruu at the same time. I didn’t know if it was due to the rivalry she felt toward Myme or what, but she had been shooting an intense glare for a while now. But I just endured that gaze and set about the next step.

“Once the tino’s boiled, you let it cool down enough that it won’t burn you and then cut away any tough core bits and the like. Then you use a wooden spoon to form the meat filling from before into a long rounded shape like so, placing it on top. Let’s go ahead and make these about the size we serve at the inn.”

It used around 120 grams of meat, and had a retail price of three red coins. And currently, it was the hottest seller at The Kimyuus’s Tail.

“Then you wrap the tino around the filling, and tie it with fibaha vines.”

“You tie up your dish with string?! I heard such methods were used in the castle town, but still...”

“Yup. If you don’t tie them together or use wooden skewers to hold them in place, the filling will all go spilling out.”

It took quite a bit of effort to investigate whether or not using these vines would have any negative impact on the dishes. Meanwhile, apparently in the castle town they had a type of string meant exclusively for cooking.

“Then, you place the bound ingredients in a pot, add some finely-sliced aria and nenon, and boil it all together with tarapa. For the broth, add water and fruit wine, along with just a bit of tau oil for flavor. Then you heat it slowly over a low flame, and all that’s left is tweaking the flavor at the end.”

At that point, we lit up all four stoves in the kitchen, so it didn’t take long for it to get rather hot in the room.

“Well, while that’s boiling we can have Myme— Gah!” I suddenly shouted before I could stop myself. That was because three faces had crept into the window right in front of me: Vina Ruu, Lala Ruu, and Bartha. “Wh-What are you three doing?”

“Huh...? We want to see the guest cook, of course...”

“That’s right! We can’t just leave things be after hearing how she may be a better chef than you, Asuta!”

“We won’t get in the way, so don’t mind us and just carry on with your work.”

It seemed that Bartha was completely blending in with the main Ruu house by this point. While that was certainly a good thing, it was also kinda bad for my nerves.

And meanwhile, Myme was looking my way with a troubled smile.

“That’s too much, saying I’m more skilled than you. Asuta, have you been telling people that?”

“I mean, I wasn’t trying to make a big deal out of it or anything.”

“I’m certain I’ll let everyone down, but I’ll try my hardest to make them smile instead,” Myme proclaimed as she placed the leather case atop the work station.

While her cheeks were turning red, there was a clear drive shining in her light brown eyes.

“Well then, I’d like to also begin cooking. Could you share just a bit of giba meat with me?”

3

“Which part of the giba will you use? Could I have you give them a taste test before cooking?” I asked, holding out the plate with the slices of meat I had prepared in advance toward Myme. It was a bite each of sirloin, rib meat, and thigh meat.

“Okay, if I grill them up and give them a try, that should help me grasp the pure taste of giba meat, I’d imagine.”

“You can borrow my handheld pot.”

Since all the stoves in the kitchen were occupied, Myme, Mikel, Mia Lea Ruu, and I went outside. Then, I pulled out a cooking tool from the wagon.

In this world it was called a handheld or single-handled pot, but back where I came from it was known as a frying pan. Naturally, this was a new cooking tool I had purchased from Diel along with a saucepan.

“Thank you. Well then, allow me to grill these up.”

Mia Lea Ruu lit up the outdoor stove, and before long those three pieces of meat were grilling away. And since all three cuts were plenty fatty, there was no need to worry about anything burning.

Meanwhile, Vina Ruu’s group of three had circled around and were now staring from the shadows along the wall.

“What are you all up to? You’ve at least finished your own work, haven’t you?” Mia Lea Ruu asked in an astounded tone.

“Of course,” Lala Ruu replied. “We’re all done with skinning pelts and drying out pico leaves. Vina and I rushed to get it finished together.”

“Then why not just come on out and observe normally? You’re going to worry our guests for no reason, sneaking around like that.”

And so, we got three additional spectators.

Still, Myme was already focused on the giba meat, so she paid them no heed.

“Just like with kimyuus meat, you should grill giba thoroughly enough that all the red goes away.”

“Right, understood.”

She then flipped over the three pieces of meat using the wooden spatula I had loaned her, revealing nicely grilled surfaces on each of them.

“These pieces of meat are so small, but they have so much fat on them.”

“Yeah. That alone should already tell you how it’s an even more wonderful ingredient than skinless kimyuus or karon leg meat, right?”

Myme nodded, moving the single-handled pot off the stove. Apparently her intention was to cook them the rest of the way using the residual heat.

“Once they’re done, you can move them over to this fresh plate.”

“Right, thank you.”

After just ten more seconds, Myme swiftly transferred the meat out of the pan. They really did look exquisitely grilled.

“Well then, allow me to give them a taste,” Myme said with a serious expression as she started by bringing the sirloin to her mouth.

Though it was a single bite’s worth, she only bit off half of it before returning the rest to the plate.

Rather than offering any impressions, she moved on to the rib and thigh meat, eating just half of each of those too.

“This... This really is high-quality meat. And is it preserved with pico leaves rather than salt?”

“Yeah. We can pick as many pico leaves as we want from the forest’s edge, so there’s no need to use salt for that. We only use it when we’re making jerky.”

“Oh, really?”

As she meticulously chewed the thigh meat that she had gone for last, Myme then held out the plate toward Mikel. Mikel had been as still and silent as a statue, and now he shot his daughter a quizzical look.

“What is it? There’s no need for me to test it, is there?”

“There may not be, but you’re interested in giba meat too, aren’t you?”

At that, Mikel silently accepted the plate.

Then, as her father carefully sampled the meat, Myme turned toward me.

“It was delicious. And there really was a change in toughness and taste based on the parts used too.”

“Yup. Differences in the distribution of fat can have a big impact on taste and texture. The fat concentrates around the edges of thigh meat, so the meat packed in the middle is denser and tougher, while the meat and fat are arranged in layers around the chest, making that cut the most tender. Then with the back, the fat is spread moderately throughout the meat, making it chewy but not overly tough.”

“Right. It really was a surprise that it was this tasty just from grilling it,” Myme

replied, and then she suddenly tilted her head. “Now that I think about it, you’ve bought charcoal from dad before, haven’t you, Asuta? Sprinkling salt on top and grilling it over a charcoal fire should be plenty tasty too, I assume.”

“Yeah. I do a lot of charcoal grilling back home myself. But we always have customers coming and going at the stalls, so we need to cook the meat all at once on trays to keep up.”

“I see,” Myme murmured, placing her hand on her slender chin and thinking. “It feels like if you weren’t careful, a dish could easily end up tasting worse than just grilling the meat. That certainly makes for quite a difficult challenge.”

“Should I have prepared some karon or kimyuus meat after all?”

“No. I feel very honored to have the chance to cook such delicious meat,” Myme said with a smile so reassuring it was hard to think it was coming from a ten-year-old. “I’ve decided. I’ll use giba leg meat for my dish.”

“Got it. What about vegetables and seasonings?”

“Just salt and fruit wine will be plenty for seasonings. I don’t have any experience using tau oil or sugar, after all. And for the vegetables, could I have you share a bit of aria, chatchi, nenon, and poitan with me?”

“No problem. Go ahead and pick what you want out of our pantry,” Mia Lea replied, then led the way to the pantry next to the kitchen.

And when she stepped inside, Myme’s eyes positively sparkled as she exclaimed, “Ooh! This is amazing! There are so many vegetables! I’ve never seen such a splendid pantry before!”

“Hmm? I never expected to have someone from town praise our pantry.”

“My father and I live alone, and the citizens of Turan are all poor to begin with, so we’d never have the chance to purchase so many vegetables. You have a lot of family here in the Ruu clan though, don’t you?”

“Yup, including the baby, there are thirteen of us. And lately we’ve had two freeloaders on top of that every other day.”

The main house and Shin Ruu’s family took turns preparing dinner for Jeeda and Bartha.

“I can’t believe it! It’s like a dream!” Myme excitedly proclaimed as she started closely examining the various vegetables around the pantry.

As I watched her hurry all about, a voice called out from behind, “It’s just like when you first visited the Ruu house, Asuta.” When I turned to look, I found Rimee Ruu standing there between her sisters.

“What’s up? Did you need some vegetables or something?”

“No. It just seemed more fun over here, so we came to watch. There’s not really much left to do with our work anyway.”

While we were having that exchange, Myme had gathered up the vegetables she needed in a basket and came back over our way. Just as she had said, she had taken just one each of aria, chatchi, nenon, and poitan.

“Are you fine with so little? Asuta will pay for everything regardless, so just use what you want.”

“No, if I use vegetables I’m not accustomed to, I’ll ruin the flavor,” Myme replied, shooting a regretful look back at the shelves.

When she saw that, Rimee Ruu declared, “You really are just like Asuta used to be!”

In the past, this place had been like a treasure trove full of unfamiliar ingredients. But it hadn’t been long since I’d come to the forest’s edge at that point, and the only vegetables or grains I had laid eyes on were aria and poitan, so that was only natural.

And it seemed that Myme wasn’t all that familiar with various ingredients thanks to the poverty she had been living in. Even if she was the daughter of a renowned chef, you couldn’t exactly go buying high-class foodstuffs without the coins to purchase them.

Now that I think about it, Ai Fa had also told me how the residents of Turan seemed to be living in poverty.

I still hadn’t set foot in the Turan lands that stretched out to the north of the castle town. But back when I’d been kidnapped by Lefreya, Ai Fa had apparently visited there as part of her search.

Though the house of Turan possessed a vast fortune, they had built it by using slaves from the north. The fuwano and mamaria fields in Turan were all worked by those slaves, and thanks to that, no jobs were left there for the residents, who lived in poverty as a result.

Myme said before that she had never handled tau oil or sugar. She may have around the same level of knowledge about ingredients as I did back when I took charge of the Rutim banquet.

But Myme would definitely be able to make better dishes than I could back then. While I knew it was wrong to get my expectations up so high, I still couldn't help but think that way.

With such thoughts running through my head, we returned to the kitchen, where Reina Ruu's group all turned at once from the various dishes they were working on to face us.

"Toor Deen, thanks for manning the flame. Now then, Myme, could you show us your cooking skills?"

"Right. I'll give it my all!"

After placing the ingredients she had carried over onto the workstation, Myme reached for her leather case. After she released the metal latch, we finally got to see what was inside.

The case's insides were lined with a thick, soft-looking cloth material. It held three varieties of cooking knives, spoons and cups for measuring, and even what looked like a whisk and a ladle. It was a complete set of cooking tools, inherited from Mikel from when he worked as a chef in the castle town.

"Oh, you use knives from Sym too, Myme?" I asked as I spied a familiar swirling pattern on the handles of the knives.

"Yes!" she excitedly replied. "These tools are all far too nice for someone like me. I also have a set of knives from Jagar back home, but I brought these today since it was a special occasion."

"Ooh. So what's that thinnest one for?"

"This is a knife for cutting fish, or so I've been told. Of course, the only fish

around Genos are all poisonous, so I've never had a chance to use it."

I had already heard as much from Polarth back when we asked about catching wild birds. That was supposedly why I didn't see any sort of seafood about the post town.

Still, even here in Genos there were surely opportunities to prepare fish in the castle town. And so I stole a glance over at Mikel, but there was nothing to be gleaned from his expression.

"And, well...I'm terribly sorry to ask, but could I have you be the one to cut the meat? If I were to cut meat I'm handling for the first time, that would just damage the flavor."

"Got it. You wanted to use thigh meat, right? What sort of shape should I cut it into?"

"All right, could I have you cut it into as thick of a block as you can manage, like you did for the prep work before? I'll leave the amount up to you, though."

There were a total of ten chefs in the kitchen including myself, and now we had an additional three spectators in the corner. Adding in Myme and Mikel, that made for fifteen people in total. With that number in mind, I cut the giba thigh meat into a block just under two kilos.

"Thank you. Also, could I have a bottle of fruit wine and just a bit of salt?"

Those were already on another workstation, so Rimee Ruu held them out with a, "Here."

"Thank you," Myme smiled back as she accepted them.

Myme started off by tenderizing the block of meat by beating it with a pole, then she began rubbing in the crushed rock salt. Once she had done that base seasoning of the meat, she started slicing all of the vegetables except the poitan.

"Please, use this stove. We'll heat everything back up later, so it's fine," Sheera Ruu said and she and Reina Ruu took off their pot.

"Thank you," Myme replied with a bow, then asked for a new pot.

After adding the block of meat to the large metal pot, she carefully grilled the

surface over a strong flame, which made for a pleasant crackling sound.

Once it was nice and browned all over, she added the vegetables: a whole ariā, two-thirds of a chatchi, and three-fourths of a nenon.

After that all heated through, she finally added the fruit wine, going quite heavy on it so that two-thirds of the thick meat ended up soaking in it.

At that point, she placed a wooden board on top as a lid, then pulled out around half of the firewood in the stove. Her plan must have been to let it simmer over a low flame.

“She didn’t use any particularly unusual techniques, huh...?” Reina Ruu whispered into my ear.

“Right,” I nodded back, only for Sheera Ruu to come in close from the other side.

“Still, her style somehow reminded me of yours, Asuta. I never got that feeling when watching the inn owners cook, though...”

It was true that there wasn’t any showiness to the process Myme used, and a lot of it employed the same cooking techniques I was familiar with. She must have grilled the surface of the meat so that the juices wouldn’t escape, and she let it simmer over a low heat in order to soften up the meat. Rubbing in salt gave the meat a base seasoning, and beating it broke down the connective tissue, which was why I also did the same. Honestly, the only difference was how she cut the vegetables.

Myme was now leaning forward in front of the stove, watching the state of the flame intently. With an incredibly serious look on her face, she would occasionally add more firewood, but she never checked the contents of the pot.

Since there didn’t seem to be anything significant happening, Reina Ruu and the others resumed preparing dinner. Twenty minutes or so passed like that, and then around when the tino rolls would be finished, Myme finally stood up.

After removing the wooden board, she then scooped up the broth with a wooden ladle. After checking the taste, she turned toward Mia Lea Ruu.

“I’m sorry, but could I borrow an outdoor stove again?”

“Yeah, no worries.”

As I wondered just what she was going to do, Myme started using my frying pan to sauté a small amount of chatchi and nenon. Then, she returned to the kitchen and added them into the pot.

While she stirred the boiling fruit wine soup, she tasted it and added more salt bit by bit. Then she replaced the lid and let it sit over a low flame for an additional ten minutes, at which point she got back up.

A good bit of the fruit wine had evaporated, as now around half of the block of meat was exposed. As for the vegetables that had sunk down around it, Myme started crushing them with a wooden spoon. She had sliced them as thin as she did precisely for this step.

Once the vegetables turned into a paste and dissolved into the soup, she turned to the poitan still atop the workstation and started cutting it into thin slices. She then added those to the pot while stirring, stopping after she put in the fourth slice.

The soup had thickened somewhat now, and the color had turned a sort of creamy red. This was also a method I employed when I wanted to simply thicken up a dish. With the karon milk soup offered at The Kimyuus’s Tail and The Westerly Wind, I added poitan to make it more of a stew.

After giving the soup yet another taste test, Myme went ahead and stabbed a bit of meat with a wooden skewer to confirm how tender it was, and then she finally turned my way with a smile.

“Thank you for waiting. It’s all done now.”

“Huh? You’re not going to taste test the meat?”

“No. It’s my first time handling giba meat, so I’m sure I wouldn’t be able to do anything further even if I did give it a try.”

I didn’t know if it was pure resolve or what, but there wasn’t any hesitation whatsoever behind her smile.

Meanwhile, with a bit of a nervous look on their faces, Reina Ruu and the others started gathering around the pot.

“So it’s finished? You really did only use salt and fruit wine for seasoning.”

“That’s right. However, the taste of pico leaves had already seeped into the meat, so I get the feeling that there will be more flavor to the broth than in the food I make at home.”

“In that case, why don’t you give my dish a taste first?” I offered, scooping up a tino roll out of the pot. Though I had stopped the flame for a bit, I had relit it so that the rolls were now hot enough to eat. After using a wooden skewer to undo the vine binding it, I poured some pale orange soup over the top, then placed a plate in front of both Myme and Mikel.

“If you don’t mind, could you give it a try too, Mikel? Since this is a dish offered to the inns, you haven’t had it before, right?”

“Yeah, since I don’t go around wasting coins on dinner.”

In that case, either Myme or Mikel must have hit upon the idea of using poitan to add thickness all on their own. After all, they would have no way of knowing I used that method without eating food from the inns.

“What a wonderful aroma!” Myme proclaimed, her eyes sparkling bright. Meanwhile, the tino rolls prepared by everyone else were carried over in front of us, so that I could confirm how they turned out.

“Well then, time to give it a taste test!”

Myme and Mikel both grabbed their metal skewers. And as I watched out of the corner of my eye, I picked up my own homemade chopsticks.

There were no issues whatsoever with the tino rolls Reina Ruu and everyone had prepared. When I bit into the tino wrapping that had grown sweeter through thorough boiling, my mouth was filled with still-warm meat juices. And the taste of those juices was just right too. There would be no problem just offering these starting tomorrow at The Kimyuus’s Tail.

Back home, I used to make cabbage rolls with a mixture of ground beef and pork, but just like with the hamburger steak, this recipe seemed just as good as the original. My tongue was thoroughly accustomed to giba meat at this point, and even if it wasn’t, giba was just such a high-quality ingredient anyway.

Just like Mia Lea Ruu had said, minced meat had a flavor all its own. And if Donda Ruu could find that delicious now, then I really was grateful for that fact.

“Aah... This dish is also truly amazing. Just eating it is enough to make me smile,” Myme exclaimed, her eyes closed in bliss. As for Mikel, he was just silently chewing away. “Still, I’m bad at putting what I feel into words. Isn’t it a fantastic dish, dad?”

“Yeah.”

Myme prodded him further. “Isn’t expressing yourself one of your specialties? Why don’t you go ahead and describe this feeling in my place?”

“Folks all have different tongues, so there’s no guarantee we’re perceiving things the same way. Besides, there’s not much point in saying how delicious a dish is.”

“Jeez! You’re always picking apart my cooking left and right, though!”

After that, we went ahead and finished taste testing the tino rolls.

Now, it was finally time for Myme’s dish.

“Hmm, now that I think about it, isn’t the order we went in odd? With my dish coming after Asuta’s, that’ll just make the gap between them stand out all the more.”

“Nah, I figure it’ll be fine. Not that I have any proof.”

“It’s hard for a statement like that to put me at ease...” Myme retorted, grinning, but with some seriously mixed emotions on her face as she picked up her meat-cutting knife.

The giba thigh meat sat there atop the unlit stove, giving off steam as she smoothly cut into it. Though that was the toughest cut of giba, it looked to have been boiled until it was really tender.

There was a faint pink at the center of the cross-section, but after that much cooking, no doubt it was perfectly heated through. After slicing off enough of the long and narrow block of meat for everyone present, Myme looked up and said, “Please, go ahead. I’m not especially confident, but give it a try. This is the best possible giba meat dish I can make at present.”

Reina Ruu stood in front of the pot, while Rimee Ruu slid in next to her holding a ton of wooden plates. Using a wooden spoon, they poured a bit of the broth over the cuts of meat, then passed them around.

The block of meat had been a bit over two kilos, but split among fifteen people, that worked out to around 130 grams each. Well, that wouldn't be enough to ruin my appetite for dinner even after trying the tino rolls, but I wasn't used to small servings like this.

"All right, let's give it a try."

As I felt my heart pounding in my chest, I brought the broth-coated thigh meat to my mouth.

At first, I almost felt myself moan at how delicious the broth was, as the viscous liquid clung to my tongue. The base of the flavor came from the sweetness of fruit wine, which blended together in amazing synergy with the vegetables and fat.

Myme's flavoring really was exquisite. The reason she went out of her way to add the chatchi and nenon must have been to perfect the taste. Those pasted vegetables helped bring forth a well-rounded flavor, and then everything was perfectly wrapped up with just the right amount of salt.

And then there was the giba meat. She had only boiled it for thirty minutes at most, so it wasn't as if it was incredibly tender. Instead, just the fatty bits around the edges were all jiggly and soft, while the red meat portions had a firm chewiness left to them.

Ultimately, the texture seemed close to a roast. Even though the meat juices didn't come gushing forth, it still had a nice pleasant chewiness to it. And the strong taste of the giba meat intermingled with the flavor of the sweet-smelling sauce as it rushed over the top of my tongue.

"Yup, this is yummy!" Rimee Ruu suddenly proclaimed loudly. There was a real look of joy shining away on her little face. "It's really, really tasty! You're so good at cooking, Myme!"

"Thank you," the young chef replied with a smile. However, her expression looked somehow sad. "But the flaws in my dish really stand out after Asuta's,

right? I knew that going in, but it still makes me feel ashamed.”

“Huh, really? I just thought it was tasty.”

“But the taste from the pico leaves was really half-baked, and I wasn’t able to make full use of the delicious flavor from the giba fat. I really am sorry for having you all eat such a bungled dish.”

“Your standards certainly are high. Personally, I was shocked to find someone from town could cook such a delicious dish with giba meat,” Mia Lea Ruu retorted with a beaming smile.

At that, I glanced around to see what everyone else thought.

The majority were wearing seriously satisfied expressions. Setting aside folks who were hard to read like Yamiru Lea and Tsvai, Barthia and Li Sudra were smiling, Vina Ruu wore a faint grin, and Lala Ruu looked a bit surprised.

Just three of the members of the group had their expressions frozen in place: Reina Ruu, Sheera Ruu, and Toor Deen.

“This is...” Sheera Ruu started to speak, only for Reina Ruu to interrupt. “It’s delicious. You’re still just ten years old, aren’t you, Myme of Turan? It really is worthy of praise, to be able to make such a delicious dish at such a young age.”

“Thank you,” Myme replied with another sad smile. “I really am grateful to hear that. And I’m sorry for taking up so much of your time today.”

Reina Ruu then averted her gaze away from Myme, firmly biting her lip. In likelihood, she...or rather, she, Toor Deen, and Sheera Ruu, had all realized just how amazing Myme was.

The young chef’s dish was delicious.

I didn’t believe the tino rolls we had eaten beforehand had been beaten definitively. And yet, today was the first time Myme had ever cooked with giba meat. On top of that, the only seasonings she used were salt and fruit wine. Aside from those, there was just the pico leaves left on the giba meat to add flavor.

As we were now, could we possibly make something that delicious with just salt and fruit wine?

Maybe the giba meat and tarapa stew I unveiled at the Rutim banquet could compete with it. But still, that dish used plenty of pico leaves, and it was made with full understanding of the flavor and quirks of giba meat. After all, I had come up with it when I had lived at the forest's edge for around a month.

If this girl was able to use giba meat however she pleased for a month, just how grand of a dish would she end up making? And that went double for what would happen if she had free use of seasonings like tau oil, sugar, and pico leaves. Were Reina Ruu and the others thinking the same things I was?

At the very least, that was what was running through my head. And just imagining it was enough to cause blazing excitement to well up in me.

I couldn't help but feel that Myme was even more amazing than I had previously thought.

4

"Huh? What's going on, everybody?"

When we finished up our study session at the Ruu settlement and returned to the Fa house, we found six women there waiting for us. They came from the Fou, Ran, and Deen clans, as well as the Liddo clan that had been showing up lately. From that group, a middle-aged woman who I believed was one of the Ran was flashing us the whites of her teeth in a big grin.

"You even have to ask? Today's the day you invited those guests from town, isn't it? We figured we should all get together and welcome them."

"Oh, really?" I replied, hopping down from the driver's seat and disconnecting Gilulu from the wagon. As I did so, the rest of the riders also started getting out. That meant Myme, Mikel, Toor Deen, and Li Sudra. Li Sudra would usually be dropped off midway to head back to her own house, but today she accompanied us, saying she wanted to see what would happen next.

"Pleased to meet you, everyone from the forest's edge. I'm Myme of Turan, and this is my dad Mikel," Myme greeted with a deep bow, at which the women all gave their names in turn. The only ones I had memorized out of the group were Toor Deen's aunt Jas Deen, and Ai Fa's childhood friend, Saris Ran Fou.

They weren't used to welcoming guests from town like the folks from the Ruu clan, so they were split between looks of deep curiosity and caution. But at the very least, the Ran woman from before gave Myme another smile.

"You're going to be preparing dinner at the Fa house tonight too, right? We would all love to join you for a little taste test, if that would be all right."

"Huh? You do too? Okay...I'll give it my all!"

Myme had managed to fully recover on the way here.

Though she had been all dejected while we were preparing to leave the Ruu settlement, during the journey here she had roused herself and declared, "I'll try to make a more proper dish at your house, Asuta!" That alone had been enough to cause me to tremble with excitement.

"Well then, could everyone please wait at the stove around back? And Myme and Mikel, could you step inside the house for now? I'll show you to the pantry."

There were just a bit under two hours left until sunset. Since I would only be preparing dinner for four, including our guests, it wouldn't be any issue at all, but I still wanted to get to work on the soup dish as soon as possible.

"Oh, could I ask you to prepare the soup, Myme? Then while that's heating up, I can introduce the other dishes."

"All right, got it," Myme replied, now wearing a serious look as she glanced around our pantry, which was truly modest compared to the one at the main Ruu house. Ultimately, what she picked out were aria, tino, nenon, myamuu...as well as fuwano flour and kimyuus egg.

"Hmm, so you're finally using myamuu?"

"Huh? 'Finally'?"

"Ah, it's just that I've gotten a lot of use out of myamuu, but you haven't used it at all until now."

Myamuu was a potherb with a smell similar to garlic. After those early days when I only had salt for seasoning, I'd always found myamuu to be very reassuring to have.

“Myamuu has a strong aroma, so for me it’s quite difficult to bring it in harmony with everything else. It’s amazing how you can use it so splendidly.”

“Hmm, I get the feeling that it’s more that I rely too much on myamuu.”

“That’s not true at all! Because giba meat has such a strong flavor in and of itself, no doubt it pairs well with myamuu. But the aroma of the myamuu would overpower kimyuus or karon leg meat,” Myme said as she loaded her basket up with ingredients. Since I wanted leg meat again, I grabbed some and then showed our guests the way to the rear stove.

During last month’s break period, we had done a big renovation on the area around the stove. A leather roof stretched overhead, and off to the side of the stove was a large workstation. Those additions were necessary to do study sessions and prep work with a large number of people.

“For now, let’s boil the giba meat and get a stock.”

After filling a pot from the house with water, Myme started to boil several thin slices of thigh meat. But before long her eyes went wide when she saw how much scum started bubbling up.

“That’s so much scum! I didn’t notice at all before!”

“Yeah, because you were boiling it in fruit wine then. It didn’t give the food an off taste or anything though.”

“That’s true... But still, that may have been what ruined the flavor.”

With a serious look on her face, Myme diligently started scooping out the froth.

“This certainly is quite the crowd...” From out of the forest, Ai Fa spoke up as she moved over to join us, returning from the hunt carrying a huge giba.

At that, each of the women introduced themselves to my perplexed clan head. And then, her childhood friend Saris Ran Fou stepped forward.

“Welcome home, Ai Fa. You aren’t injured anywhere, are you?”

“I’m not... As you can see, I don’t have so much as a scratch on me.”

“I’m glad to hear that... Truly, I am grateful for the compassion of our mother

forest,” Saris Ran Fou replied, joining her hands together in front of her chest in prayer. Ai Fa, meanwhile, scratched her head and looked like she didn’t know what to say.

“Saris Ran Fou, prayers like that should be reserved solely for family.”

“My apologies. But you’re every bit as important to me as family...”

The members of the Fou and Ran clans watched the two of them with warm gazes.

For a long time, Saris Ran Fou had cut herself off from Ai Fa. Even after the Suun were no longer a threat and their clans reforged their bonds, things had remained awkward between them. And that was because Saris Ran Fou had been unable to wipe away the guilt she felt toward Ai Fa.

However, that relationship ended up getting mended for an unexpected reason. Back when I was kidnapped by Lefreya, Saris Ran Fou had apparently barged into the Fa house to soothe my clan head’s overwhelming grief.

Now that things had finally been patched up after over two unfortunate years apart, Saris Ran Fou wore a truly blissful smile. Though she was the more mature and elegant of the pair, she paid no heed to who was watching as she moved very close to Ai Fa, which really warmed my heart to see.

Well, Ai Fa’s acting just as blunt as always, but I’m sure she’s every bit as happy inside to reconcile with her childhood friend, I thought, unwittingly breaking out in a smile. And then, with a slight blush on her face, Ai Fa kicked me in the leg.

“Umm, did I make some sort of careless blunder that earned me that?”

“Quiet, you.”

At that, Saris Ran Fou let out a quiet giggle.

And then, Myme loudly shouted, “Ah! It’s been some time! Um, do you remember me...?”

“Hmm?” Ai Fa muttered, shooting Myme a questioning look.

Still holding the scum-scooping ladle in her hand, Myme gave a bow.

“I’m Myme of Turan. I really am glad that you were able to find Asuta.”

“Are you...that girl I met in Turan, perhaps?”

“Yes!” Myme answered, her eyes sparkling.

I was the one left in shock here, though.

“Y-You two know each other? But how?”

“Well, I already informed you of how I searched the Turan territory back when you were kidnapped by that noble child, correct? It was then that I met this girl.”

This was another shocking new revelation for me. I had never imagined Ai Fa would have formed bonds not only with that maid Sheila from the house of Daleim, but even with Myme. It seemed that a whole lot happened with Ai Fa during that period, and not just the thing with Saris Ran Fou.

Paying no heed to my shock, Myme just kept on smiling.

“I’m so glad to hear you remember me.”

“You’re the only one who showed us any sympathy at all in Turan... I see, so you were Mikel of Turan’s daughter, then?” Ai Fa replied, sounding deeply moved as she looked back and forth between Myme and Mikel. “It seems if a parent has a good heart, their child will be raised well too. I’m overjoyed to welcome our savior Mikel and his daughter to the Fa house as guests.”

“Savior?” Myme questioned. Now she was the one left tilting her head.

Ai Fa didn’t seem like she was going to say anything further, and so I went ahead and explained in her place.

“The one who confirmed I was being held in the manor of Count Turan was a boy named Jeeda. And it was your father Mikel who told Jeeda where that manor was. That means I owe Mikel my life.”

“Huh?! You never told me about that, dad!”

“I didn’t do anything... I just answered the question I was asked,” Mikel grumbled with a sour look.

After jabbing him in the side with her elbow, Myme then shot Ai Fa a smile.

“Fate certainly can be mysterious. I was worried about you all this time. Back then, you just said you were looking for your comrade who was kidnapped by ruffians...but you’re Asuta’s family, aren’t you?”

“Indeed. I am the head of the Fa clan, Ai Fa.”

“Ai Fa of the Fa clan... I want to thank the western god over and over again for having been granted the chance to meet the two of you, Ai Fa and Asuta,” Myme said with a mature-looking expression.

And as she met that gaze head on, Ai Fa nodded back. “Right. Well then, I have my own work to take care of. But I’ll be looking forward to tonight’s dinner, Myme of Turan.”

“Right, I’ll give it my all! By the way...that’s a giba, isn’t it?! It really is amazing how you can hunt down such a huge beast!” Myme excitedly proclaimed, having regained her usual childish innocence as she stared at Ai Fa’s back. The giba my clan head was carrying had to weigh somewhere in the seventy-to eighty-kilo range.

Though Ai Fa was acting perfectly composed, there was a hint of sweat on her forehead. Even she had to be exhausted after taking down a giba that size and carrying it all the way back home.

“I can’t skin this beast next to the stove, so I’ll be carrying out my work over that way.”

“Right, you got this.”

Ai Fa nodded, then departed around the side of the house.

Mikel moved to follow her, only for Myme to question, “Where are you going?”

“I’ve seen you cook a thousand times, so I’ll go watch this giba skinning instead.”

“Huh?! You’d leave your own daughter while she’s working on such an important job?!”

“What part of this is ‘an important job’? It’s just all something you decided to do on your own,” Mikel bluntly replied before also leaving.

“Tch!” Myme clicked her tongue in annoyance, then she got back to scooping scum. And then, one of the Fou women called out to her.

“Hey, you’re going to be boiling the meat just like that for a while, right?”

“Huh? Ah, yes. I intend to let it boil thoroughly for the next half an hour to an hour.”

“In that case, I think I’ll go wash the innards or something. The Fa clan’s always helping us out, after all.”

With that, around half of the women took off. The ones who remained were Toor and Jas Deen, Li Sudra, and the Liddo woman.

“So Mikel didn’t tell you anything about me or the Fa clan, huh?” I called out.

“That’s right,” Myme replied with a nod as she added wood to the stove. “After Ai Fa visited our house I talked to dad about it that night, but he just said, ‘Don’t get involved with the people of the forest’s edge.’ I’ve only heard the rumors around town about that whole incident with the house of Turan too.”

“Is that so...? Now that I think about it, Mikel started buying meals for two after that whole commotion died down.”

“Right. I’m sure it was the house of Turan rather than the people of the forest’s edge that dad wanted me to have nothing to do with. But that’s only natural, considering what they did to him in the past.” After casting her gaze down for just a moment, Myme looked up with a smile. “But dad’s been helping out the people of the forest’s edge from the shadows, right? That thought makes me incredibly proud.”

“Yeah. Mikel’s a wonderful person.”

And the one who introduced us to Mikel was the leader of the Silver Vase merchant group from Sym, Shumiral. Then that led to me encountering Myme, so yeah, fate really did work in mysterious ways.

As we were having that relaxed chat, eventually the Ran woman returned in a hurry.

“Asuta, could you come with me for a bit? Or if you’re too busy, Toor Deen would be fine too.”

“Huh? What’s up?”

“That old man is saying some strange stuff. We don’t really get it, so could you come listen instead?”

Asking me was one thing, but why request Toor Deen? At any rate, I took along a somewhat uneasy-looking Toor Deen and joined up with Ai Fa and everyone.

“Ah, Asuta. And I see you came too, Toor Deen,” Ai Fa greeted with bloody hands, turning toward us. The way she looked didn’t suggest that this was anything particularly urgent, and so that calmed me down for the time being.

Mikel stood there stock still with the same sour expression on his face as always, while the women were shooting us troubled looks. And the giba was dangling from the tree with its naked white flesh exposed, a mountain of innards lying on the pelt stretched out atop the ground.

“What’s the issue here, Mikel?”

“It’s not really anything. I just questioned how they were handling the innards.”

“Ah, the handling of the innards?” I said. Toor Deen must have been summoned because she was seen as an expert at cooking them. “So what’s your question? After we wash out the giba innards, they do make for a pretty tasty ingredient.”

“I already heard that. But you don’t make the meat into sausages?”

“Sausages?”

“When I ate your cooking I remembered how even though finely mincing meat isn’t popular at all in Genos, they have dishes like that in Sym,” Mikel stated, sounding annoyed. “Just like with jerky, that method’s supposed to help preserve the meat. So when I heard innards go bad easily and need to be eaten within five days, I asked why not make them into sausages.”

“Well, I do have an interest in sausage, but I’ve never tried making any. Besides, if you’re focusing on preservation you’d still end up with something tough and dried out like jerky.”

“When you completely remove the moisture that causes stuff to rot, it’s only natural it’d be tough. But if you finely mince the meat, it’d be a lot easier to chew than normal jerky, right?”

“That’s true. But the people of the forest’s edge have such tough jaws and teeth that a lot of them don’t like their meat that soft.”

“Hmph... But wouldn’t travelers in town want dried sausage? I’ve heard plenty of travelers from Sym walk around with gyama sausages.”

I was left at a bit of a loss for words.

Mikel, meanwhile, just bluntly continued on.

“Now that I think about it, you’ve stopped selling jerky at your stalls, haven’t you? I guess you don’t need to anymore now that you’re making so much profit with your other dishes, eh?”

“N-No, like we discussed before, we ended up raising the price of meat in the ashen month, and after that the jerky stopped selling entirely. It’s no surprise we wouldn’t get any takers when it’s not much better than karon jerky but now costs one-and-a-half times as much.”

“That’s ridiculous. The jerky sold in the post town is made with karon leg meat, so you should be able to make something higher-quality with giba.”

“Hmm. Then, is there an issue with how we’re preparing it?”

After giving a small sigh, Mikel started scratching his head with his left hand.

“Where’s your smokehouse? There must be something off with it.”

“Er, we don’t have anything like that. At the forest’s edge, we hang it from a tree and smoke it over an open fire with lilo leaves.”

“Is your firewood from grigee trees...?”

“No, we don’t really have a specific type of firewood we use. Is grigee wood especially suited to smoking food?”

At that, Mikel let out a now clearly audible sigh. “Despite knowing all those different cooking techniques, you’re a complete amateur when it comes to smoking food?”

“Yeah. It’s kinda embarrassing,” I replied, leaning forward a bit in excitement. “You know all about it though, right, Mikel? Could you give me a bit of instruction on how it’s done?”

“Instruction...?”

“Yeah. To be honest, when I’ve been able to find time I’ve been experimenting with trying to make tasty jerky, but my progress has totally stalled. If you don’t want to, though, then...”

“Regardless of how I feel about it, if we start smoking at this point, the sun will end up setting. And I don’t really think you can make proper smoked meat without a smokehouse,” Mikel bluntly answered, only for a voice to chime in.

“Um...”

When I turned in shock to look, I found Li Sudra standing there behind me. I hadn’t noticed at all, but apparently she had come over with me and Toor Deen.

“Do you need to do something special to make a smokehouse? If you just need a free house, there are a number of them in the Sudra clan... When people don’t live in a house, it soon falls to ruin, so it would be nice to be able to put them to use instead.”

“If you’re talking about a finely-built wooden home like this one, that would be great for smoking food,” Mikel replied as he looked up at the Fa house. “But it’s too late for today. If you definitely want to try, then we’ll have to do it some other day.”

“You’ll come visit the settlement at the forest’s edge again?” I asked, filled with anticipation.

“If you really insist on it,” Mikel answered, furrowing his brow. “There’s one other thing I wanted to ask... Have you just been throwing away the giba’s head?”

“Huh? Yes, I don’t really know how to handle anything from the neck on up, so we’ve just been shaving the meat off the cheeks and then discarding the rest...”

“What a waste. The eyes, brain, and tongue of most animals are considered

valuable,” Mikel said as he glanced all around the dangling naked flesh of the giba. “It certainly is odd to eat the entrails but not the head. And as for how to use them, as long as you heat them through, they at least shouldn’t give you the runs.”

“Then would it be fine to just boil it, skull and all?”

“As far as I know, the most common method with karon is to crack open the skull so that the brains are exposed and then boil it up. As for the tongue, you can just slice that off in advance and treat it like any other grilled dish.”

“Doesn’t the tongue require additional preparations? Er, I’m completely inexperienced, so I’m just guessing here...”

Mikel shot me a glare out of the corner of his eye.

“With karon tongue, you start by lightly boiling the surface, and then you cut off the tough skin. But if you’re dealing with a young karon, then the skin is tender too so you can just grill it as is. I don’t know anything about how it’d be with giba, though...”

I turned toward Ai Fa. After wiping the grime from her hands, she once again picked up her knife. “If it’s edible, then it certainly is a waste to just leave it for the mundt. Why not give it a try with this giba?”

“In that case, we’ll go ahead and wash out these innards. If we just leave them here forever, it’ll hurt their flavor,” the Ran woman said, turning toward Toor Deen with a smile. “You and Asuta should pay close attention to how he prepares the head. And then you can teach the rest of us later.”

“Right, understood.”

At that, the women left to wash the innards bundled up in the pelt.

Ai Fa started by dissecting everything below the neck and burying that in pico leaves in the pantry, and then she faced the head itself.

A sliding door was laid out on the floor of the main room in the house to be used as a cutting board, and the giba head sat atop it. Lately she had been cleanly skinning the head too, so the white bone and hypodermis sat there clearly exposed.

“Let’s start by cutting the tongue loose.”

As Mikel, Toor Deen, and I all watched, Ai Fa inspected the giba’s head.

“The tongue seems to be connected rather deep in the throat. Would it be quickest to remove the lower jaw, I wonder?” she mused aloud, pulling out a small blade which she slid into the joints of the jaw, then cracked it apart. That was the monstrous strength of a hunter for you.

Now that the giba’s tongue was exposed, Ai Fa cut it loose at its base.

“Hmm. Looking at it like this, it certainly is massive,” Ai Fa commented, picking up the light pink tongue with her fingers. It was long, thick, and slimy-looking. I figured it had to be around twenty centimeters or so in length. It had a rather grotesque appearance, but as an ingredient it looked like it’d be seriously delicious.

“The surface doesn’t seem especially tough. Can this just be eaten as is?”

“Well, why not try it like that this time, and if it seems like an issue, add that boiling and cutting step?”

“Right, so next is the brain? But a giba’s skull is tough, so a blade could actually break if you insert it carelessly...”

“If there’s any sort of seam in the skull, then you should be able to use that to open it up,” Mikel stated.

“Hmm,” Ai Fa murmured with a tilt of her head. Then, she started using her blade to cut away the hypodermis still clinging to the skull. “Yes, there is indeed a seam.”

Ai Fa pressed her knife up against the black seam running through the skull. And the blade appeared to slide on in with shocking ease. She twisted the knife and the giba skull split open with the sides separating from each other. My clan head then reached inside, and with a cracking sound she wrenched it completely apart.

“Considering how large the tongue was, the brain certainly is small,” Ai Fa stated, holding it out for us to see. Sure enough, there was a round little brain with a pale pink color on the inside of the right half of the skull. Though the giba

it had come from had to be around eighty kilos in total, the brain was only around the size of a human fist.

“We should boil this, right? But what about the eyeballs?”

“With karon, you boil them along with the brain and bones. Since you can get stock from bone, it works out just fine,” Mikel explained.

“I see.”

After removing the horns and tusks, Ai Fa dropped that split skull into a pot.

“That concludes my work here. I leave the rest to you, Asuta.”

“Yeah. I’ve never even heard of dishes involving brains or eyeballs before, so I guess all I can do is boil them.” After ladling out some water, I went ahead and lit the stove. “For the time being, I guess I’ll add some lilo leaves to alleviate the smell at least a bit. Whoa, that’s a ton of scum...”

It was coming bubbling up at a tremendous rate, even more so than when boiling meat. I figured that was proof it was packed with both off flavors and delicious ones too.

“What will you do with the tongue? It seems rather substantial.”

“Let’s just try slicing it thin, sprinkling salt over it, and grilling it. It seems like it’s just the right amount to have everybody give it a try.”

I at least had experience with eating beef tongue before. And so, just imagining what giba tongue would taste like was enough to get me excited.

As I entrusted Ai Fa with manning the stove for the skull, I headed for the outdoor stove, where Myme greeted me with a smile.

“Ah, Asuta! So that’s giba tongue?! Just what does it taste like, I wonder...”

“I’m certainly looking forward to it too. Are you still working on the parboiling?”

“Yes. You told me that giba meat gets softer the more you boil it, so I wanted to try pushing it a bit further.”

It was just around then that the group who had been washing innards returned, so I decided to go ahead and give grilling the giba tongue a shot. And

so, after setting steel meshes over the stove, I went a bit luxurious and used some charcoal.

“Ooh. Looking at it now, the tongue is just more meat, isn’t it?”

All the women present were currently staring at the sliced giba tongue. Each of the slices were a bit under a centimeter thick, and they sure looked seriously tasty. I had chopped off the unshapely bit at the base and added it to the pot with the skull, so what was here now looked just like the beef tongue you’d see on offer at a yakiniku place.

“Well then, let’s try grilling it up.”

I placed a slice of giba tongue on each of the meshes, and instantly the fat started dripping down onto the charcoal and making a sizzling sound.

By the time I had put down the tenth piece of meat, the first one had started turning a nice color. Still, they were around a centimeter thick each, so as I carefully heated them through and flipped them over in turn, the irresistible aroma of grilling meat and fat filled the air.

“I feel bad for everyone back home, that we’re getting such a wonderful experience all to ourselves again.”

“What’s wrong with that? This way, we can make the same thing for our families as soon as tomorrow if we want.”

Now that they mentioned it, around half of this group had also been present when we taste tested the offal. As one of the newcomers this time around, Saris Ran Fou was left blinking there in surprise.

“All right, time to eat. Could you grab that plate, Toor Deen?”

“Right, here you are.”

I laid out the grilled giba tongue atop the large wooden plate. Then, to finish it off, I sprinkled some sheel juice I had brought from the house over it.

“Go ahead, everybody. They’re hot, so be careful not to burn yourselves.”

After all the women present picked up a slice of giba tongue, I finally reached out for one myself. Since it was just freshly grilled, I swiftly tossed it into my mouth so I wouldn’t be burned by the fat.

The thick fattiness was counteracted by the sheel juice, making it perfectly tasty. And though it was thick, it had a more refreshing flavor than beef tongue, with a crispier texture. Plus, the flavor of the meat itself was stronger than with beef. I was already pretty full from my time at the Ruu settlement, but I still felt like I could eat several slices of it.

“Mikel, Myme, please go ahead and give it a try too.”

“Thank you!” Myme replied with a smile, while Mikel just grabbed the meat with a frown. “So tasty! It has yet another unique, wonderful flavor, unlike any normal meat!”

“Yeah. The fat and meat are blended together as one, so it makes for a different sort of texture than the other cuts, doesn’t it?”

I felt confident you wouldn’t need to remove the surface layer like with karon tongue.

It was such a delicious cut that could be prepared so easily, and yet we had been just discarding it out in the forest all this time. I was just as ashamed, if not more so, at my own thoughtlessness than I had been when I first tried cooking up innards.

And when we had finished taste testing the giba tongue, Myme loudly proclaimed, “All right! I’ll give it everything I’ve got to make a dish that’s just as good! I think it’s about time to move on to the next step!”

“Right. I’ll be looking forward to it.”

Before that, I had to share this deliciousness with Ai Fa too. I moved to go do just that, but after a moment of thought I stopped myself and turned toward Saris Ran Fou instead.

“Umm, I have to watch Myme work, so could I have you bring this to Ai Fa?” I asked, holding out the plate. The woman seemed a bit taken off guard, but then she gave me a smile.

“All right. I’m sure Ai Fa must be getting rather anxious over in the house, after all.”

“Yeah, that’s what I was thinking too.”

With an even brighter smile than before, Saris Ran Fou took off running toward Ai Fa.

The two of them were always so busy that they never really had the time to take it easy and chat. So it would be good if they could rekindle their old friendship, even if they only had a moment while they enjoyed the rest of the giba tongue.

5

Roughly an hour had passed.

The sun was now hidden beyond the western horizon, and we had prepared everything for dinner at the Fa house right on schedule.

Naturally, the women from the other clans had all returned to their own homes, meaning it was now just us members of the Fa house and our two guests. We were seated at the head spots, while Myme and Mikel were seated in the lower ones, with tonight's dinner laid out in front of us.

"It wouldn't do to let this dinner you both prepared grow cold, so let's go ahead and eat."

Ai Fa and I then said the pre-meal chant that was customary at the forest's edge, while Myme and Mikel just silently bowed their heads.

With that, dinner finally kicked off, but this was an even more satisfying meal than usual. On the menu was my meat dish and Myme's soup dish, the baked poitan, and the boiled giba head.

Out of those, Ai Fa and I were naturally most focused on Myme's soup dish.

"Hmm, it smells just as strong as Asuta's myamuu giba," Ai Fa stated, sounding deeply curious as she took the plate.

The other women had all given it a taste test before heading home, but I hadn't gotten to try it yet. However, I *had* gotten to observe it being made from start to finish.

After boiling the giba thigh meat for such a long time, Myme first sautéed some finely-chopped myamuu and then paired it with giba meat stock. Then

she finally added the vegetables and thoroughly boiled everything again. This time around, she thinly sliced the aria, cut the tino into chunks, and quartered the nenon, which was all fairly standard.

Then in the meantime, she baked the fuwano. After kneading it in water, she rolled it out flat at a thickness of around five millimeters, then cooked it up nice and crispy. She tore off bits a pinch at a time and added them to the pot, and when the fuwano softened she adjusted the flavor with salt and pico leaves. Perhaps Myme was putting the lesson from earlier to use in employing pico leaves for an additional seasoning.

Finally she added a beaten kimyuus egg and stirred it about, and once that was heated through, the dish was complete.

The fuwano floated up in the cloudy soup, and the yellow egg added a further accent to the dish. As for the aroma, that was primarily dominated by the myamuu.

There really wasn't anything especially novel in the steps. Still, the method of adding torn chunks of fuwano to a soup was the same one Timalo had used, while Roy had added beaten egg to his dish, so I couldn't help but be reminded of the castle town.

"Well then, time to dig in," I said, shooting the rather nervous-looking Myme a smile as I scooped up some soup with a bit of fuwano and egg.

The giba fat had formed a film on top, which was shining away as it reflected the light from the candle. At last, I gently brought that captivating soup to my mouth.

The first thing that hit me was the powerful aroma from the myamuu flowing up through my nose. Then my mouth was filled with the herb's sharp taste, the punch from the pico leaves, and the deliciousness of the giba meat.

Having absorbed the soup, the fuwano now had a pleasant squishy feel. And the kimyuus egg added a nice, smooth texture that was a bit more low-key.

Despite the powerful aroma, it really was a pretty mild flavor.

The sweetness of the giba fat and vegetables seeped into my tongue. And I was filled with an even greater sense of satisfaction as I ate some of the meat

and vegetables.

“This is delicious,” I stated, earnestly feeling that way from the bottom of my heart. “It’s on a whole other level than the soup from earlier in the day. So much so that I’d really have to call it a proper full-fledged giba dish.”

“You’re exaggerating. The giba fat really was strong, so the flavor ended up a bit rough,” Myme stated, but her expression was shining bright. “But I believe I was able to make something tastier than when I use kimyuus or karon leg meat back home. That really goes to show the power of giba meat.”

At that, I turned to face my clan head, only to find her wearing an awfully serious look.

“What do you say, Ai Fa? Myme’s skills really are something else, aren’t they?”

“Yes, it’s delicious.”

“And yet you’re wearing quite the expression, aren’t you...?”

“No, it’s not as if I have any issues with the taste. It’s just...” Ai Fa replied and then stopped, her gaze wandering as she seemed to search for the words. “How should I put it...? I couldn’t help but think it was as if this was something you had prepared, Asuta... If I ate it without knowing otherwise, I might well have been confident in saying you had made it.”



“Ooh, really?”

“Indeed,” Ai Fa answered with just a bit of a frown. “I can understand the Ruu women and Toor Deen preparing dishes with similar flavors to yours, as you did teach them. But why do I feel the taste of this dish is so similar to something you would prepare?”

“Well, that’s probably because there were a lot of similarities in our cooking methods. I saw Roy cooking plenty of times at the Turan manor, but for better or worse, those techniques felt like they had come from another culture entirely. Compared to that, Myme’s cooking process seemed a lot more familiar.”

“Hmm...”

As she kept on eating, the uncertain expression remained fixed on my clan head’s face.

Maybe Ai Fa had been expecting something like the dishes Timalo had prepared. It did make sense to think that way, considering Myme had been instructed by Mikel, who had also been a chef in the castle town.

Having listened silently to the conversation between me and Ai Fa, Myme now gave a seriously embarrassed smile.

“It’s far greater of an honor than my cooking deserves, for it to be described as similar to Asuta’s dishes. I still haven’t succeeded at drawing out the delicious flavor of giba meat, after all.”

“I don’t think that’s true at all. This dish is very tasty, and the flavor feels perfected too.”

“No, I believe my dish was overwhelmed by the presence of the giba meat. To me, cooking with it felt like riding on the back of a wild toto.”

“Ooh, that’s an interesting simile,” I chimed in with an unwitting chuckle, causing Myme to break out in a bashful grin.

“That’s why I think you’re amazing for being able to ride it so smoothly, Asuta. Thinking about it, since I haven’t had anything but kimyuus and karon leg meat to work with until now, it’s like I’ve only ever ridden a well behaved toto

walking leisurely along flat ground.”

“Honestly, I think *you’re* amazing for being able to make such delicious dishes with meat as bland as karon legs and skinless kimyuus.”

My words caused Myme to freeze in place.

“Then do you perhaps have trouble handling karon leg meat and skinless kimyuus, Asuta?”

“That’s right. To be blunt, I’m not confident I could make anything tastier than you can with those meats.”

“Ah, so that’s why you have such an opinion of me...?” Myme replied, her eyes shining bright in understanding. “I definitely get that. So bland meats and strongly flavorful ones each need their own techniques and experience to handle. I had thought it strange how you kept on talking so highly of me... But you weren’t especially trying to flatter me or anything, were you?”

“I don’t think I ever use empty flattery when it comes to cooking.”

“If you’ve been earnestly praising someone like me, then that really is something to be proud of...” Myme said, and then seemed to hug her own body. “Thank you. I’m so happy it’s making me feel all choked up for some reason.”

“Now *that’s* overblowing things. Why don’t you just give my dish a try instead?”

“Right, thank you for the meal.”

Myme reached out and grabbed the plate with the meat dish, her eyes shining bright.

It was a new recipe I was currently experimenting with, based on twice-cooked pork. I started by boiling giba rib meat, then sauteed it with aria, tino, and pula. For flavoring I went with a tau oil base, to which I added sugar, myamuu, chitt seeds, and ramanpa nuts.

Since I didn’t have anything resembling the Chinese chili paste needed for seasoning twice-cooked pork, it was made in a rather Japanese style, but I was still pretty confident when it came to the flavor.

And when she bit into the dish, Myme let out a wistful sigh.

“Eating something as delicious as this really shatters my hard-earned confidence. Does this sweetness come from that seasoning from Jagar called sugar?”

“Yeah. The ability to use sugar instantly expanded the breadth of flavors I can achieve.”

“But no matter how wonderful the seasoning may be, if you don’t know how to use it you’ll just ruin the flavor. That was what my dad taught me.” At that, Myme stole a glance at her father, but the man just kept on silently eating his meal. “So it makes me even more amazed at your skills that you can use it so well. I truly am impressed.”

“There was stuff like sugar and tau oil back in my home country, so I’m just used to having them around, is all. The chefs in the castle town all probably know how to use seasonings like that better than I do.”

“No. If you were the same as the chefs from the castle town, I don’t think dad would have had me eat your cooking.” Myme had a gentle look in her eyes as she stared at her father. “In the past, I had asked him if I could try food from the castle town, even just once. I know I must have lived there up until I was five, but unfortunately I can hardly remember anything from back then at all.”

Personally, all I could remember of the time before I entered elementary school was vague recollections of playing with friends at home or in the park.

“But dad said there was nothing at all to learn from the chefs there. He always said the majority of chefs didn’t know how to properly use the great number of ingredients available to them, and that it was like they were just being dragged along by wild toots.”

“Hmm, I see...”

“So I started my training by seeing how good I could make my dishes using just salt, vegetables, and meat. By keeping not just stuff like tau oil and chitt seeds but even herbs and myamuu to an absolute minimum, dad taught me to put the flavor of my ingredients to full use. How much of each ingredient did I need, and how long should I be cooking it for with how strong of a flame...?”

That's what I practiced for four years."

Four years... That certainly was quite some time.

My old man was a chef too, but he hadn't started training me to cook at quite such a young age.

"Just a month or so ago, dad brought your cooking back home, and then he permitted me to start using fruit wine for flavoring."

Upon hearing that, I shot Mikel a surprised look. However, the man just kept on eating with a frown.

"You meant I should aim for being a chef like Asuta, right? I think you see your old self in Asuta's cooking, dad."

Was that the case? If the basic principles behind my cooking and Mikel's were similar to start with, then that could explain why I had no trouble whatsoever seeing Myme's dishes as delicious.

Still, Mikel hadn't said so much as a word. Instead, he was just shooting me and Myme disgruntled glares.

"Seems you two are more interested in talking than eating. And just how long do you intend to leave that pot boiling for," Mikel finally interjected, referring to the boiling giba head. It had been left atop the stove, and was being kept warm on the lowest flame possible. "If you keep it over the flame too long, the brain and eyeballs will go and dissolve on you. And maybe that would be a fine dish in and of itself, but it wouldn't exactly be good for testing them as ingredients."

"That's true. In that case, let's go ahead and give them a shot." If Mikel didn't want to chat, then I didn't see a need to force him. And so I just said that with a nod and a smile before heading over to the stove.

Besides, I was looking forward to trying these out too. And so I did my best to calm my rapidly-beating heart as I removed the board serving as a lid.

Instantly, the room was enveloped in a vivid meaty smell.

Ultimately I had decided to add salt, tau oil, and chitt seeds to the giba head soup. I made the decision because it seemed like the brain and eyeballs would

have every bit as strong of a scent as dishes made with innards, so I made those additions for some flavor and aroma.

“As far as soups go, it seems like it managed to make a real high-quality stock. But how are the fillings, I wonder?”

“How should I know? And let me just say in advance, there’s no guarantee the eyes and brain’ll be tasty.”

“Huh? R-Really? But before, you said...”

“Brains and eyeballs are valued highly in the castle town. But they’re prized as delicacies for their rarity, not their flavor. If it was something everyone would find delicious, it wouldn’t be called a delicacy in the first place.”

However, the giba tongue ended up being as tasty as torso meat. And the people of the forest’s edge had a real favorable reception toward giba hearts and the like too. So I had raised my expectations at least a little in regard to the eyeballs and brain.

“Hmm, we can’t really split the eyeballs, so should we take charge of taste testing them, Ai Fa?”

“Indeed, since we cannot go feeding things we’ve never even tried to our guests.”

Ai Fa didn’t seem stirred in the least.

Back when we were first trying the innards dishes, the people of the forest’s edge didn’t especially show reluctance or revulsion. To them, the brain and eyeballs and innards were all just more of the forest’s blessings. So as long as they tasted fine, there was no reason at all to avoid them.

Meanwhile, I might just have become even more of a chicken since I had come to live here at the forest’s edge. Heart, liver, and intestines were one thing, but as far as I knew, eating eyeballs and brains wasn’t exactly all that common back in my old world.

Still, even so, I had no intention of running from this dish. Donda Ruu used to call giba torso ‘mundt feed,’ while Jas Deen had said innards seemed like they would taste bad. I had urged everybody to eat them even then, so I couldn’t

exactly let myself get cold feet now.

“All right, then let’s start with the eyeballs.”

Using metal skewers, I dragged up half of the skull that had sunk down into the pot. The chunks of meat and fat had pretty much all sloughed off, leaving just a white skull along with eyeballs that had gone the same color.

“By the way, I wonder how Deek Dom is doing...”

“Hmm? Why are you bringing him up all of a sudden?”

“I mean, he just suddenly came to mind when I looked at the giba skull. All the hunters in the Dom clan wear them on their heads, right?”

“You certainly have some strange thoughts in the middle of dinner...” Ai Fa also used metal skewers to pull up the other half of the skull, then with no hesitation at all she shoved a wooden spoon into the eye socket and popped out the eyeball. “Hmm, what an odd shape,” she murmured, and then just tossed it into her mouth like it was nothing.

“W-Well? How is it?”

“Hrmm... It has a bit of an unusual taste,” Ai Fa replied, slightly furrowing her brow. “The flavor is light, but the scent is harsh. It has an even odder smell than giba meat that hasn’t been bled... I’m sure you will be able to come up with a superior way of preparing it with experience.”

“I-I see. So the taste didn’t turn out to be all that satisfying, huh?”

“If I was satisfied with this, it would be like denying the worth of the dishes you usually make.”

The more I heard, the more my cowardice reared its head.

But at this point, there was no turning back. If this was a dish that needed improving, then that was all the more reason I needed to confirm that with my own tongue. So I firmed up my resolve and just went for it, shoving the eyeball into my mouth.



“Hrngh...”

“Hey, don’t go making such strange noises, you fool.”

“Oh, er, well... It’s true that this is definitely a bit lacking in terms of seasoning.”

Despite how thoroughly I had boiled it, I could still feel that raw animalistic stench filling my mouth. The texture was sorta squishy but also sorta tough... Honestly, it was a bit hard to describe.

With a ladle I scooped up some broth so I could gulp it down together with the eyeball I had been chewing.

“Ugh, that was rough. That’s the first time eating giba has caused me to break out in a cold sweat.”

“Really? Aside from the stench, I didn’t have any particular issues with the taste.”

“Yeah, I guess I just don’t have much experience when it comes to eating eyeballs. The next chance I get, I think I’ll try using plenty of myamuu and tarapa to add a strong smell and taste of their own.”

“Well then, next is the brain,” Ai Fa said, flipping over the skull. Apparently the brain was buried there in the half she had.

After breaking away the bits of bone that made an indent at the base, Ai Fa was able to completely expose it. And the giba’s brain had also boiled up moist and white.

“Will you have some too, Myme and Mikel?”

The answer to that question was yes. Apparently I was the most timid when it came to trying new things.

At any rate, I went ahead and moved the brain over to a flat dish and sliced it into four parts, but since there wasn’t any stench to it, this one wasn’t that hard to eat. The taste was like the tender cod milt I had eaten one time back home.

“This is delicious. But I think I can see why it’s called a delicacy too.”

“It’s at least as good as karon...”

It seemed our guests didn't have any complaints.

"And the broth is tasty too! I can sense a bit of stench about it, but I'm sure you can prepare it even tastier than this, right Asuta?"

"That's true. I'll try a couple different things later."

"How amazing. To think you can use not just the meat but even the brain, eyes, and innards as ingredients... It makes me quite envious, considering only very limited cuts of kimyuus and karon are sold in the post town," Myme said as she pecked at another bite of what was left of her pseudo-twice-cooked pork. "What sort of taste do karon torso and kimyuus wings have, I wonder? Just thinking about it is enough to get my heart pounding."

"That's for sure. I've only ever had them in dishes with some seriously complex flavoring myself, so I can't really say I know a thing about karon torso either. I've gotten to do a little taste test of kimyuus wings before though."

"They must be quite tasty, seeing how the folks from the castle town buy them all up. But at least for now, I just can't imagine there being a more delicious meat out there than giba," Myme remarked with a cherubic smile. "Still, working with kimyuus and karon leg meat is all I can handle now. Even if it's like riding on the back of a well-tamed topos, you can still fall to the ground if you're not careful, so I'll keep my guard up and just keep on trying my best."

I almost reflexively responded, but held myself back.

Meanwhile, Mikel just kept on eating what was left on his plate with a look of feigned disinterest.

And so, the dinner we had invited Myme and Mikel to headed toward a nice, peaceful conclusion.

Epilogue: Walking the Same Path

“Well then, I’ll see you back to Turan in the wagon,” Ai Fa had said after we finished dinner and enjoyed some pleasant chatting for a while.

Myme looked pretty sleepy as she watched Ai Fa attach Gilulu to the wagon under the light of the moon.

“You look quite tired. I’ll lay something out to rest on in the wagon, so go ahead and lie down.”

“Sorry. It’s like all the anxiousness poured out of me as soon as my work was done,” Myme replied, and then she turned to face me with a bit of a drowsy look in her eyes. “Thank you so much for today. I learned so many things that I don’t think I could even begin to list them all.”

“I feel the same way. And let’s both keep giving our all, okay?”

After grinning joyfully, Myme then swayed on over into the wagon.

She must have been hitting her limit even more than I had expected. But, well, that was no surprise considering she was only ten years old.

“Ah, Mikel, could I have a moment?” I called out, inviting him back inside before he could follow after his daughter.

I took off my shoes and headed for the pantry. And when I returned, Mikel shot me an intense glare.

“What is that?”

“As you can see, they’re ingredients. As long as you don’t have any objections, could you please accept them?”

Packed in a leather bag were a variety of cuts of giba meat equaling roughly ten kilos, about a liter-sized bottle of tau oil, a container with about the same amount of mamaria vinegar, and five hundred grams of sugar from Jagar.

I laid that bundle of ingredients I had been cradling in both arms down at my feet.

“I think the idea of building up experience with a limited number of ingredients really is wonderful. So if you say she doesn’t need any of the seasonings, then I won’t force the matter...but I really would like you to at least take this giba meat back with you.”

“Why...?”

“Because I want Myme to polish her skills at cooking giba meat even more, of course,” I muttered as I stared up at Mikel, who was just a bit taller than me. “Before, she compared ingredients to totos. So putting it that way, I’d like to see her get better at riding them.”

“Again, why...?”

“Because...I think that would provide a great stimulus for me too,” I earnestly answered. “I’ve met numerous chefs around here, but I had always felt we were aiming for something very different. With Myme, I get the sense we’re both attempting to move in the same direction... That makes me really happy, and it also seriously spurs me onward. I mean, I feel like I absolutely don’t want to lose to her.”

“You don’t want to lose, but you’re giving her ingredients?”

“Yes. Since we can’t exactly compete properly with things as they are... Actually, it might be that I’m irritated with the way things are, where I’m losing every time in my head but coming out on top in actuality.”

“So you want to compete with Myme under the same conditions, eh?”

“No. I don’t think that cooking is actually about competing with your skills, so at its core it isn’t actually about who wins or loses... I simply want to see more of Myme’s abilities. And then, that’ll get me even more stirred up than ever.”

“You sure do say some cheeky stuff, kid...” Mikel said with a little sigh, then he started stroking his cheek with his left hand. “Still, there’s not anything for Myme to gain from improving her giba cooking skills.”

“You think so? We’re now finally able to sell giba meat, and we’re spreading the taste of giba cooking throughout Genos. So if Myme’s aiming to be a chef, I don’t think it would be a waste to study how to handle giba meat.”

Mikel didn't say anything in response.

"Mikel, you've been trying to raise Myme to be a chef, haven't you?"

"I've got nothing to do with it... She started dreaming of being a chef all on her own."

"I don't think it's just a dream at all. With her level of skill, she could even start selling her cooking now. And the former head of the house of Turan who hurt so many skilled chefs has no power at all now."

Mikel silently stared down at the half-spread fingers of his right hand. Because the tendons had been severed, three of those fingers could no longer move.

"Myme mentioned that she looked up to *me*, of all people. But over the course of these past few days, I've come to really admire her too. And I feel like there would be a whole lot more to gain if we could see one another on the same footing. So won't you please accept these gifts...?"

"I'm not especially hard up for money or anything... For the past five years, I've been desperately saving up coins to send her out into the world," Mikel suddenly stated in an emotionless tone. "If she was aiming to be a chef here in Genos, she would have fallen into the hands of the house of Turan in the end. That's why I wanted her to get away from this place... If possible, I had planned to take her to the capital of Selva, Algrad. I kept on living despite my disgrace in order to earn the coins for the traveling expenses, wagon, and bodyguards we'd need to hire."

"Disgrace? That's..."

"There's no more need to flee from this town, though. She should be able to make a living as a chef here in Genos just fine. And as one of her potential business rivals, you're trying to take pity on her...?"

"It's not pity. This is for my sake too, and for the people of the forest's edge. If Myme becomes skilled at preparing it, then the delicious taste of giba meat can spread even further throughout Genos."

Mikel slowly shook his head. "I've got no reason to accept your charity. After all, since we no longer need to head for the capital, that money no longer has a

purpose. So if she needs ingredients, I can buy as much as I please.”

“I see...”

“So I’ll just take this,” Mikel stated, grabbing hold of the bag of giba meat with his left hand. “Of course, I’ll pay you for it too. After all, this stuff is the highest-quality meat on offer in the post town.”

I broke out in a grin.

And then, something truly unexpected happened: Mikel shot a lively grin back at me.

“Even without you rushing things, I had already intended on letting Myme use tau oil, sugar, herbs, and so on,” Mikel added with that grin.

It was the first time I had ever seen the man smile. It was a bold and daring grin, like what you’d expect from a seasoned general heading for the front...and it was quite charming too.

“That’s thanks to you people making it so these ingredients could be found even in the post town. From here on out, you won’t have an easy time selling food there if you can’t handle that stuff... She’s been planning on copying you and opening a stall in the post town.”

“Really?! That’s a wonderful idea.”

“Hmph,” Mikel snorted. “After these past four years, Myme has finally managed the bare minimum of learning how to manage her flames and level of salt. If she adds a variety of other ingredients on top of that and masters the handling of giba meat, I’m sure she’ll be able to make something unbelievable. She’s still nothing but a little brat, but I’m certain she’s hiding what it takes to become a better chef than I ever was. I hope you won’t regret giving her giba meat, Asuta of the Fa clan...”

“I definitely won’t. And I’ll give it everything I’ve got so I don’t lose to Myme.”

“I’m sure you’ll learn first hand from here on out just how huge of a task that really is,” Mikel replied, returning to his usual frown. And with a firm light in his eyes, he stared right at me. “You should definitely be able to thoroughly draw out Myme’s strength. As I am now, that’s not something I can do anymore...”

“No, but it’s thanks to your guidance that Myme—”

“That’s why I brought you and Myme together,” Mikel murmured, cutting me off. “The fact that I was able to meet a chef like you before I became an old bag of bones and dropped dead might just have been one last blessing from the western god...The western god took my wife and my future from me, but gave me you and Myme. I guess that’s what you’d call a balance of good luck and bad.”

“Mikel, you...”

“You aren’t the sort of chef who will end up as just a stepping stone for Myme. If you don’t want her to crush you, then you better not go back on your word from before... You’ve got enough skill for it, after all.”

“Got it,” I replied, a greater shiver than ever before running down my spine as warmth filled my chest.

And so, my relationship with that father and daughter pair with their checkered fates and quick wits grew even deeper.

Group Performance

Chapter 1: The Youngest Ruu Son's Little Adventure

1

It was the second day of the ashen month, two days after the dinner party to foster friendship between the leading clan heads of the forest's edge and the nobles of Genos.

The wicked nobles Cyclaeus and Ciluel had both been arrested for their crimes, but there was still an air of unrest hanging over Genos. The reason was because the bandit group that those nobles had manipulated from the shadows, known as the Winds of Black Death, still hadn't been apprehended.

According to Cyclaeus's confession, apparently they were the ones who had once infiltrated the Zaza settlement, and also dressed as hunters of the forest's edge and attacked the Dabagg plantations. The lord of Genos put out a warning to stay on guard until those dangerous outlaws were all arrested, so Ai Fa and Asuta of the Fa clan were still staying at the Ruu settlement.

Asuta had been unable to resume business with his stalls, so he had instead been spending his time holding study sessions for the women under the Ruu. As for Ai Fa, she had been riding off on her tolos to go hunt around the Fa house every day, then once she finished her work as a hunter, she would return to the Ruu settlement. That was how the two of them were currently spending their time.

Of course, the hunters of the Ruu were also carrying out their own work. No matter how dangerous the Winds of Black Death might have been, they couldn't exactly go sneaking into the settlement while the sun was high in the sky, and besides, they had no reason to go after the people of the forest's edge now that the nobles giving them orders had been arrested. Even Ai Fa and Asuta were only staying at the Ruu settlement just on the unlikeliest of off

chances that anything might happen.

And so, despite the uneasy feeling in the air, the days at the forest's edge had been quite peaceful of late. But on this second day of the ashen month, there was at least a little bit of a stir.



“Hmm? What’s the commotion about?”

It was currently around sunset at the Ruu settlement. Ludo Ruu had been on a casual stroll after finishing his hunting work, until he came across a group making a stir off in a corner of the plaza.

The trio consisted of Lala Ruu, Shin Ruu, and Mida. As Ludo Ruu approached, Lala Ruu turned his way with an angry glare.

“Ah, Ludo, you tell them too! You can’t suddenly become a great hunter by acting all reckless, right?!”

“Man, you’re noisy. What in the world is going on here, Shin Ruu?”

It seemed like the only one actually kicking up a fuss here was Lala Ruu. Unlike her, Shin Ruu’s eyebrows were drooping as he stared at Ludo Ruu, as if asking for help.

“It’s nothing, really. I was just trying to do some training as a hunter with Mida.”

“Like I said, it’s reckless to go training like that right after finishing up your hunting work! Dinner’s soon anyway, so why not just rest a bit till then?!”

“But...” Shin Ruu murmured, a brooding look in his eyes.

“Hmm...” Ludo Ruu pondered, scratching his head. “Hey, *usually* Lala’s wrong about everything, but this time it looks like you’re at fault. I told you before, didn’t I? Letting your body rest is an important part of our work as hunters.”

“Yeah, I’m trying to keep that in mind, but still...”

“What if you wreck yourself through training and then screw up on the hunt tomorrow? I’m sure my old man and Ryada Ruu would tell you the same.”

Shin Ruu didn’t have anything to say in response.

“Besides, the hungrier Mida is, the weaker he gets. When he’s starving right before dinner like this, you could probably take him down in no time flat just by sweeping out his feet,” Ludo Ruu continued while giving Mida’s protruding belly a thump. But after feeling the impact, he furrowed his brows a bit. “Mida, did you lose a little weight again?”

“Hmm...? I’m not really sure...” Mida absentmindedly replied from high up above. He didn’t seem to be paying any attention whatsoever to the commotion down by his feet.

However, his round little eyes buried under fat looked sort of listless. Perhaps he was concerned about Zuuro Suun, who was being held in a prison in the castle town. The man who had once been his father would soon have his crimes judged, after which he would be sent off to some unknown location.

“Right...” Ludo Ruu murmured, thumping that belly again. “You may not look very different, but it seems your fat’s been getting replaced with muscle. I still definitely won’t let you beat me at the next festival of the hunt, though.”

“Yeah...”

“At any rate, picking a fight with Mida is dangerous. Whether you win or lose, if this belly of his falls on you, it could easily break a bone. So wait till both of you are in top condition first.”

“Got it...” Shin Ruu replied, the look in his eyes growing even more broody. “Was I unable to choose the right path forward because I’m still so immature?”

“Hmm? What are you on about now? If you’re immature, then that would go even more so for the majority of the other hunters around your age, right?”

“But I can’t beat you or Mida in a contest of strength, and back then...I couldn’t protect Asuta either.”

“Hey, Shin Ruu!” Lala Ruu shouted, looking even angrier. But Ludo Ruu held out his hand to silence her.

“Umm, Shin Ruu, about that... Hrmm, what was it again? My old man and brother have something they say at times like this...”

Shin Ruu just looked confused.

“Imprudent! Right, that’s imprudent! It’s only natural not to accept your own mistakes and want to improve. But if you rush things and make poor choices, you’ll end up getting weaker rather than stronger, right?”

Shin Ruu didn’t respond.

“That day’s going to be a lifelong shame for me too. Even with Asuta being held hostage, if my old man had been there he might still have been able to do something about it. When I think about that, it makes me so angry that it makes me want to get stronger and stronger too.”

Shin Ruu hadn’t been the only one guarding Asuta when that Lefreya noble had him abducted. After all, Ludo Ruu had been on the job too.

However, Shin Ruu had been right by Asuta’s side, while Ludo Ruu had been standing sentry outside the building. That was likely why the young hunter had ended up lamenting his own powerlessness all the greater. Ludo Ruu could understand just how he felt to a painful degree.

“That’s exactly why we need to train properly, isn’t it? If you go down the wrong path, then I’ll end up getting stronger all on my own.”

“Hey, try thinking about how Shin Ruu’s feeling at least a little! Don’t you think you could phrase that a bit better?” Lala Ruu retorted, now shooting Ludo Ruu an angry glare.

“You sure are a hassle... Isn’t it tiring being angry like that all the time?”

“I’m only angry because you two keep doing stuff to make me mad!”

“I didn’t do anything at all. This is such a pain... You two should just hurry up and get married already. Ah, but Lala’s still thirteen... Ugh, so that means this’ll keep going on for two more years?”

At that, Lala Ruu’s fists came flying. But Ludo Ruu just dodged, circling around behind Mida.

“What, you’re gonna get married, aren’t you? There’s no way you’re gonna settle down with someone else at this point, right?”

“Shut up, Ludo, you stupid jerk! You’re always saying stuff you shouldn’t!”

Lala Ruu persistently tried to follow, but Ludo Ruu kept circling around so that

Mida was left standing there aloofly between them. And as he watched on, Shin Ruu's face was even redder than Lala Ruu's.

"Y'know, you're always teasing everybody else about it, but what about you?! You're fifteen now, so you could take a bride, couldn't you?" Lala Ruu retorted, panting after having finally given up on her pursuit.

"What about me? Are you saying there's some woman I'd want to marry?"

"You should be asking yourself that, not the people around you! The Ruu have a ton of related clans, so you must at least have a couple girls you're interested in, right?"

"Hmm, nah, can't think of anyone whose face would get all red just from a bit of teasing."

Once again, Lala Ruu's fists came swinging.

And as Ludo Ruu avoided them, Shin Ruu finally spoke up.

"Still, it's a fact that folks under the Ruu are worried about how the members of the main house have been waiting so long to marry. That might mainly be Vina Ruu and Darmu Ruu's fault, but eventually it'll be your problem too, won't it, Ludo Ruu?"

"What's it really matter? Even if you just leave things be, folks who are meant to be together will be together. You two should know that better than anyone."

In the end, Shin and Lala Ruu were the only ones whose faces were left red.

It was then that a figure came wandering over from the other side of the plaza.

"Ah, so this is where you were, Ludo Ruu? Dinner will be starting soon."

"Huh? Hey, Morun Rutim. What have you been up to?"

"I've been getting in plenty of cooking practice since midday. But we went so long, it looks like I'll be borrowing a bedroom in the main house tonight."

Morun Rutim was the youngest daughter of the main Rutim house. She had a bit of a plump build resembling her father's, and was also fifteen just like Ludo Ruu. Ultimately, she was a gentle-featured woman with a very charming smile.

“Ooh, sounds like you’re pretty fired up.”

“Yeah, well, you see, when the Ruu clan reopens their stalls for business, I’m going to end up taking turns with Ama Min to help out. So until then, I’ll be studying at the main Ruu house.”

The Ruu clan was also planning a grand reopening for their stalls once those outlaws from the Winds of Black Death were apprehended. At first, the Rutim couldn’t help out with that work since they were shorthanded on women, but since they had welcomed Tsvai and Oura into their clan, they were finally able to spare the personnel.

“Gotcha. So, what’s for dinner tonight? Asuta’s been thinking up all sorts of new dishes again, hasn’t he?”

“Hee hee, you’ll just have to wait and find out.”

“I see. Well then, let’s hurry on back! Shin Ruu, Mida, see you tomorrow. And Lala, don’t go causing too much trouble at Shin Ruu’s house, all right?”

“Shut up! I’ll be back after dinner, okay, Morun Rutim...?”

“Right. We’ll have lots of time to chat in the bedroom.”

Lala Ruu was once again set to eat today’s dinner at Shin Ruu’s house. It was an arrangement that had been put in place to allow Shin Ruu’s older sister Sheera Ruu to get plenty of instruction from Asuta in the main house’s kitchen. So on days like this, Sheera Ruu would eat dinner at the main house, while Lala Ruu would head to Shin Ruu’s house in turn.

Though they were both members of the Ruu clan, it was quite rare to get the opportunity to eat dinner with the main family if you were a member of a branch house, like Sheera Ruu was. Plus, Asuta and Ai Fa were staying at the Ruu settlement, so adding Morun Rutim on top of that made things feel sort of like a banquet. Looking at it that way got Ludo Ruu pretty excited.

“Ugh, I’m starving! I’m really looking forward to seeing what dishes are waiting for me!” Ludo Ruu proclaimed on their way to the main house, to which Morun Rutim offered him a smile from beside him.

“Hey, Lala Ruu and Shin Ruu seem to be getting along as well as always, don’t

they?”

“Yeah, that’s true. I can’t help but wonder if they’re going to go and get married the day after Lala turns fifteen or something.”

“You’re overexaggerating,” Morun Rutim retorted with a smile. But then in the next moment, her expression grew clouded.

“What’s the matter?” Ludo Ruu asked as they walked along through the plaza.

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“You had a sad look on your face just now, didn’t you?”

“I-I don’t think so.”

“You totally did. Do you have a guy you like or something?”

At that, Morun Rutim turned just as red as Lala Ruu had before.

“W-Why are we talking about men all of a sudden?”

“Because we were just talking about Lala and Shin Ruu. Doesn’t it make sense to assume that?”

“Ludo Ruu, you can be pretty goofy, but you really do keep a careful eye on people, don’t you?”

“What? I may be goofy, but I just see what I happen to see.”

“I’d say that’s amazing, though. Plus, you’re really kind too.”

It didn’t exactly feel that way to Ludo Ruu. In fact, he had just a little while ago been running his mouth and getting chased around by his little sister.

But at any rate, Morun Rutim’s face was extremely red, and she had a very serious look in her eyes.

“U-Um, there’s something I’d like to discuss with you, Ludo Ruu!”

“Go ahead, just throw it on out there.”

“I’m serious here, so could you listen seriously too?”

“I’m being serious. You’re a precious member of the clans under ours, and we’ve been close since we were little,” Ludo Ruu replied, stopping and facing Morun Rutim.

The girl fidgeted and stared down at the ground. Though Ludo Ruu was small for a boy, Morun Rutim was even shorter than he was.

“It looks like...I’ve found a man I have feelings for.”

“Yeah, I figured out that much.”

“But I don’t know what to do... It’d definitely just cause trouble for him...”

“There’s no way that’s true. Anybody out there would love to have you for a bride.”

“Th-That’s not true at all. I look just like my father Dan, after all...”

“I wouldn’t really say you look just like him. Well, except for how you make the same exact face when you’re angry.”

Morun Rutim didn’t reply.

“But you only get mad when you have a good reason, so what’s the issue? If someone can make you angry, they’re gonna be in the wrong anyway. And you’re so cute when you smile that I can’t imagine anyone having a problem with marrying you.”

“It’s really not a problem?”

“Of course not.”

Upon hearing that, Morun Rutim timidly looked up.

“Then just let me say...this is sure to surprise you.”

“No it won’t. If you’re okay with telling me, just come out and say it.”

In response, Morun Rutim whispered something so quietly it was impossible to pick up.

“Hmm?” Ludo Ruu questioned, moving in closer.

“...om...”

“I can’t hear you. What’d you say?”

“It’s Deek Dom...”

Ludo Ruu had declared he wouldn’t be surprised, but now his eyes opened wide in shock.

“Umm, isn’t Deek Dom about the same age as my old man?”

“Of course not! Haven’t you met him before, Ludo Ruu?!”

Deek Dom had also come along on guard duty during the meeting with the nobles. And they must have met at least briefly at the clan head meeting...but the only impression that came to mind was the giba skull over his head, the searing gaze of his black eyes underneath, and his burly limbs coated in scars.

“Hmm, I can’t really remember too well... But where exactly did you get a chance to meet him, Morun Rutim?”

“Just like you, it was on the day of that meeting with the nobles. My father Dan and brother Gazraan went along, so all the members of the Rutim clan gathered at the Ruu settlement. And we had a chance to talk a bit.”

“Did you seriously fall for him just like that...?”

“Yeah... Is that weird?”

“Hmm...” Ludo Ruu pondered.

It might well have been true that there were plenty of folks at the forest’s edge who fell in love at first sight. As far as Ludo Ruu could see, his sisters Vina and Reina Ruu had been quite taken with Asuta ever since the day they’d met.

“I guess it may not be weird at all. I mean, apparently giba start making kids then and there when they meet.”

“Umm, could you please *not* lump me in with giba...?”

“Ah, yeah. Still, I can get why you’ve been so worried. It’d be one thing if we were talking about a clan under the Ruu, but he’s subordinate to one of the other leading clan heads, which makes things tricky in a bunch of ways.”

“Right... Plus he’s the head of the main Dom house, while I’m the youngest daughter of the main Rutim house... Both of us are members of the main houses of the next biggest clans under the Ruu and Zaza, so it’s not like we can just go acting as we please...” Morun Rutim lamented with a deep sigh. If it was possible, she looked sadder than Dan Rutim did when he finished off all the ribs.

“Hmm...” Ludo Ruu pondered again. Before he could think of anything sensible to say, though, Morun Rutim cut him off in a fluster.

“Umm, thanks, Ludo Ruu. Just talking to you helped calm me down a bit.”

“Eh? But nothing’s been resolved at all.”

“Yeah, but it was impossible from the start. Besides, it’s not like there would be a chance for the Dom and Rutim clans to meet in the future anyway, so there won’t even be an opportunity for us to form a bond...”

“In that case, why not discuss it with Gazraan Rutim? He’s good at handling troublesome stuff like that.”

“No, I think I’d just trouble Gazraan if I brought it up to him,” Morun Rutim replied in an oddly decisive tone.

Well, it was true that if Gazraan Rutim really were skilled with that sort of thing he probably wouldn’t have stayed single until he was twenty-three and worried everyone around him.

“So it’s fine... I probably won’t want to marry anyone else for the time being, but I’m sure eventually those feelings will settle down,” Morun Rutim said, now wearing her usual bright smile. “Thanks for listening. Now then, everyone’s waiting, so let’s hurry on back.”

With that, Morun Rutim took off running for the house awash in twilight. And as he watched the small roundish girl take off, Ludo Ruu once again pondered, “Hmm...”

2

It was now just before evening on the following day.

Currently, Ludo Ruu was riding the totes Ruuruu toward the Dom settlement.

A lot of giba had fallen prey to traps this time, so they had finished up work early.

The big catch was a good thing, but the bounty of the forest still hadn’t grown back all that much around the Ruu settlement just yet. And so the only giba to be had at times like this were generally crappy ones that lost fights elsewhere and wandered over, or ones that were on the verge of starvation. They were all either covered in scars or wasting away. It really left Asuta at a loss as to how to

use them to make tasty meals, considering how little fat they had.

Well, guess manning the stove brings its own sorts of hardships, Ludo Ruu thought to himself as he rode Ruuruu along the path. The totos seemed happy. This was the first chance it'd had in a while to really run full speed.

The wind whistling past felt very pleasant. And the unfamiliar members of other clans he passed occasionally looked really surprised.

Ludo Ruu loved riding on the back of a totos. It hadn't even been two months since Ruuruu had come here to the settlement, but he felt like he had been a rider for a long, long time.

It was commonly said that the people of the forest's edge shared blood from the south and east, and furthermore, easterners supposedly rode totos across grassy plains. Asuta had once joyfully suggested that meant that maybe memories of riding across the plains were still sleeping away in their blood even now.

But at any rate, Ludo Ruu loved to ride totos. And he would love to do it a whole lot more if he had the time.

Should I go and buy my own totos like Rau Lea did?

It had been decided that once the Ruu started getting serious about doing business in the post town, they would purchase a wagon. That was because it seemed wrong to keep imposing on Asuta's kindness to help transport everything.

But if that happened then Ruuruu would be in the post town during the day, and wouldn't be available for the purpose of sending emergency messages. In that case, it would be good to get another totos for the Ruu settlement.

Should I try talking to my old man about that tomorrow?

He passed the somewhat nostalgic path to the Fa house, the ones to clans whose names he didn't even know, and even the way to the Suun settlement...and then around when the sun was setting to the west, the northern settlement finally came into view.

This was the end of the long path leading through the forest's edge, the true

northern extreme of their community. Ludo Ruu pulled back on Ruuruu's reins, slowing the massive bird's pace as they entered the grounds.

Considering the time, it was no surprise that there wasn't anyone wandering about outside. But as he approached the nearest home, a shadowy figure leapt out from within. It was a hunter from either the Zaza or Jeen, with a giba pelt worn over his head.

"Who are you...?"

"I'm the youngest son of the main Ruu house, Ludo Ruu. I have business at the Dom settlement."

"The main Ruu house... Do you have some sort of urgent news? Were those outlaws finally captured?"

"No, seems like things are still the same as always over in Genos. I came today to handle a personal matter. Of course, I've got no intention of picking a fight with the clans of the north, so you can relax."

At that point, a remarkably huge figure exited the house. He wasn't especially tall, but he was incredibly wide. And if Ludo Ruu wasn't misremembering, he was the head of the main Jeen house.

"The youngest Ruu son, eh? Long time no see. What's this about you having business with the Dom clan?"

"Ah, I've just got a bit of something to discuss with Deek Dom. I did technically get my old man's permission too."

The Jeen clan head fell silent for a bit, and then he pointed to the west.

"The Dom settlement is at the end of that path. Giba can still show up around this time, so we'll lend you a candle."

"Thanks, I appreciate it."

Back when the Suun were still the leading clan, it never would have been possible to come this far into the northern settlement. And if they had found out he was a member of the Ruu clan, they might have all ganged up on him and beaten him to a pulp no matter what he said.

Sure feels strange, somehow...

Common sense had been flipped on its head in a lot of ways since Asuta had come to the forest's edge. Meals had become so delicious it was shocking, the Suun clan had fallen, there were now three new leading clan heads...and the Ruu clan was doing business in the post town.

If anyone had somehow predicted such a future before Asuta showed up, nobody would have ever believed them. The people of the forest's edge were in the middle of a period of upheaval as major as when they had decided on Morga as their second home eighty years back. Ludo Ruu really was grateful from the depths of his heart to have been born into such an interesting era.

Compared to all that, the thought of a Dom and Rutim wedding seems almost quaint, doesn't it? Ludo Ruu thought as he held the candle borrowed from the Jeen clan and continued down the path. Ruuruu's footsteps had grown a bit heavier, so it might have sensed all sorts of beasts squirming about in the forest.

Ludo Ruu didn't sense anything as big as a giba, but there could still be snakes around that were as big as young madarama, or carrion-eating mundt looking for prey.

The northern clans sure picked a dangerous spot for a settlement.

With things like this, the women working on the outskirts of the forest couldn't let their guards down either. Maybe this was why it was said that the northern clans lived the harshest lives of any of the people of the forest's edge.

As such thoughts ran through Ludo Ruu's head, his destination finally came into view. There were just five houses nestled together, in an open space that wasn't really especially large. And so he went up to the biggest of the houses, then hopped down from Ruuruu.

"Sorry for bothering you so late! I'm the youngest son of the main Ruu house, Ludo Ruu! I have business with the Dom clan head Deek Dom!"

A heavy silence was all he got back.

Just as Ludo Ruu was getting ready to shout again, though, the door opened.

"You called yourself the youngest son of the main Ruu house, correct? What business do you have with my clan head?"

Ludo Ruu was seriously taken aback by the fierce air about the woman.

She looked to be a bit older than Ludo Ruu. And since she was so tall, she probably had around a half a head on him. On top of that, her chest and rear were large and her waist was tight, but her arms and legs had plenty of muscle on them. In terms of appearance, she might have looked more like a female hunter than Ai Fa did.

“Umm, it’d take a while to explain. I realize I’m here late thanks to my hunting work, but I did at least bring a gift, so would it be all right if I talked to the clan head?”

“Hmph... We’re about to eat dinner, though.”

“Ah, I brought along something to eat, so you don’t need to worry about me.”

“That’s not what I meant...”

With her arms crossed, she looked down on Ludo Ruu. And as she moved, the giba ribs adorning her hips jangled.

Her long black hair was worn high up, pulled back well clear of her eyes staring down at him, her prominent nose, and her plump lips. She was more than pretty and sensual enough, but her face had a rough manliness to it too.

No matter how attractive she may be, I wouldn’t ever want such a strong-willed woman as a wife... Ludo Ruu rudely thought, until a man’s muffled voice sounded out from inside the house.

“What are you doing, Lem? If it’s not something you can deal with by yourself, then let him through.”

That fierce yet beautiful woman then shrugged her shoulders and stepped back.

“Well then, I’ll take charge of your steel. You actually are a member of the Ruu clan, aren’t you...?”

“There wouldn’t be any point to lying, would there? Is it all right if I bring my tolos into the entrance?”

With a seriously annoyed look in her eyes, that Lem Dom woman replied, “Go ahead.” After handing over his sword and hatchet, Ludo Ruu stepped inside

along with Ruuruu and closed the door.

“The youngest Ruu son, Ludo Ruu, eh? What brings you here so late?”

Deek Dom was awaiting them there at the head of the main room, sitting cross-legged. Ludo Ruu sat himself down, still holding the leather bag with the present and his meal in it.

“I’ve got a little something to discuss with you. By the way, where’s the rest of your family...?”

“Our family is just me and Lem.”

“Huh? The main house is just the two of you?”

“There are fifteen members of the Dom clan. Of them, my younger sister Lem and I are the only ones in the main house.”

Comparing them to the clans under the Ruu, fifteen people put them at around the same size as the Lea. Still, it was surprising to learn that the main house of the famously dauntless Dom clan had just two people in it.

“Diga and Doddoo are in the charge of the branch houses, which have more men. So, just what do you want with the Dom rather than our parent clan, the Zaza...?” Deek Dom asked, staring at Ludo Ruu as he sat with one knee up in the air. He seemed calm, but there was a very intense light shining in his eyes.

Since the man wasn’t wearing the usual giba skull on his head, Ludo Ruu was able to see his face clearly for the first time. Sure enough, he actually didn’t seem all that old. His rugged, scarred face didn’t sport a mustache or anything, and the bridge of his nose was surprisingly shapely.

Still, his lower jaw was firm and square, and the scars on both his cheeks were seriously imposing. Just like his little sister, his hair and eyes were both black, and his limbs had an unusual amount of muscle on them. His frame was even bigger than that of Gulaf Zaza or Ludo Ruu’s old man Donda Ruu. He might have still been a bit smaller than the largest man under the Ruu, Ji Maam, but still...if you were considering who seemed stronger, Deek Dom would easily win.

He may be stronger than not just Ji Maam, but even Gulaf Zaza...

In other words, he could be a match for Donda Ruu, someone even Ludo Ruu

couldn't compete against. As he thought that, an antsy sensation ran down the boy's back.



If I ever get the chance, I'd love to have a contest of strength with him, Ludo Ruu thought as he reached into his leather bag.

“Before all that, let me hand over my present. It’s nothing much, but I prepared some fruit wine and jerky.”

He wanted to share Asuta’s cooking with them too, but it was against the customs of the forest’s edge to eat a dinner prepared on a distant stove. And since there were supposed to be a lot of hardheaded guys up north when it came to such old-fashioned rules, Ludo Ruu figured it was best to err on the side of caution.

“Fruit wine and jerky, huh?”

“Yeah. That jerky’s proudly made by our own Ruu clan,” Ludo Ruu replied, holding out the two bottles of fruit wine and a block of jerky to Lem Dom, who was closer. After seeing her clan head give a nod, she then accepted them. “I’d feel bad for interrupting your dinner, so if you don’t mind, could we talk while eating? I’ll go ahead and eat what I brought too.”

The familiar smell of poitan stew was wafting from the pot simmering over a stove in a corner on the right-hand side of the room. And after once again getting the clan head’s approval, Lem Dom headed over that way.

As he watched her movements out of the corner of his eye, Ludo Ruu pulled his own meal out of the leather bag. It was bundled up in a suurub leaf. And when he undid the vines holding it shut, the baked poitan inside came into view.

If he wasn’t careful, he could easily let his grin slip out. After all, his meal was a croquette sandwich Asuta had prepared for him.

“I’m thinking of offering either a croquette sandwich or a giba cutlet sandwich once we reopen the stalls for business. So if you don’t mind, could I hear your impressions later?” Asuta had asked, but his impressions were already almost set in stone even before eating it. After all, between those two bits of baked poitan was a giba and chatchi croquette, which Ludo Ruu felt was the tastiest food in the world.

As he sneaked a glance inside the poitan, he spied the faint brown coating of

the croquette. That Worcestershire sauce thing Asuta made with tau oil was smeared on top, and there was also finely-sliced tino between the croquette and the poitan.

And further in the bag was a deep plate sealed in a suurub leaf. When he carefully unwrapped that one while taking care not to spill anything, he found a stir-fried dish made with giba meat, aria, and chatchi.

“I think it’ll impact the taste some when it gets cold, but you wouldn’t get enough nutrition from just the croquette sandwich,” Asuta had explained.

The meal on the dish had used a heaping helping of aria. And the powerful aroma of myamuu and tau oil was only making him feel all the hungrier. As he laid those dishes out by his feet, Lem Dom looked seriously anxious to pick her own plate back up.

“We offer our gratitude to Lem Dom, who manned the flame and gave us our life for this night...” Deek Dom stated, his solemn voice echoing throughout the sparse room.

Unsurprisingly, it seemed that Lem Dom had made the poitan stew on her own. But, well, if she was just cooking for two, it wasn’t all that big of a task.

From looking at it, it seemed to be the same dish they used to make at the Ruu house, produced by just boiling meat, aria, and poitan together. The Ruu clan had added in a variety of different vegetables to change things up each day, but there was no sign of such steps here.

“I offer my gratitude to Asuta, who manned the flame and gave me my life for this night,” Ludo Ruu chanted, at which Deek Dom’s eyebrows twitched.

“Youngest Ruu son... Should you not be eating that in the same house as the chef who prepared it?”

“Hmm? That custom is supposed to show that you place your life in the hands of the chef and they do the same in turn, isn’t it? In that case, I don’t think where you actually eat it is all that important.” Asuta had also been concerned about that fact, but Ludo Ruu was prepared to explain it in his own way. “Both Asuta and I have plenty of resolve on that front. It would be Asuta’s responsibility if this dish were to injure my life or soul, while I have absolute

trust that would never happen. And you two were witness to my oath to the forest, so there shouldn't be any issue at all."

He didn't seem all that convinced, but Deek Dom silently went ahead and picked up his own plate. And with a little smirk pulling on the corner of her mouth, Lem Dom did the same.

Looks like this is going to be pretty difficult.

With a slight shrug of his shoulders, Ludo Ruu bit into his croquette sandwich.

The poitan and the fuwano coating had both softened a little, and the fluffy chatchi and finely-minced giba meat was now a bit cooler than body temperature. But even so, the croquette sandwich was still delicious.

"There's no question that it's tastier when freshly cooked, but a lot of the time people back where I came from would eat it after it cooled down too," Asuta had mentioned when they parted ways.

It was true that the fuwano coating had pretty much entirely lost its crisp crunchiness. But the way the Worcestershire sauce had seeped into the coating and made things just the right amount of moist and soft gave it an entirely different sort of texture that was still plenty satisfying for Ludo Ruu.

That Worcestershire sauce thing had a pretty strong taste to it too, and it paired really well with the nearly flavorless poitan and tino. But more than anything, chatchi really was just plain delicious. As he vaguely wondered in the back of his mind just why it was that he loved chatchi so much, Ludo Ruu vigorously chowed down on the rest of the croquette sandwich.

On top of that, there was another croquette sandwich wrapped up in the leather bag. The thought that he would get to enjoy even more of that flavor made Ludo Ruu so happy he could hardly stand it.

"Hey, what exactly is it that you're smiling about, youngest son of the Ruu...?" Lem Dom asked, sounding suspicious.

"Huh? I was smiling? Well, this meal is so delicious that I guess my mouth just moved on its own."

"Hmph... So that's that 'delicious cooking' brought about by the Fa house?"

As she sipped down some goopy white poitan stew, Lem Dom once again gave him a lopsided smile. “Out of the clans under the Zaza, the only ones who have tasted that are the ones who participated in the clan head meeting, and the Deen clan to the south. I would like to give it a try as well sometime, to see how extravagant it really is.”

“In that case, why not just stop by the Ruu settlement sometime?” By chance, that happened to hit on the topic Ludo Ruu wanted to discuss. “Hey Deek Dom... What I’m about to say didn’t come from my old man directly as leading clan head. It’s just something that’s been talked about here and there in the Ruu clan, so please keep that in mind. But do you northern clans have any interest in learning how to make delicious meals?”

The intense glare in Deek Dom’s eyes turned toward Ludo Ruu.

And yet, the boy just kept on talking as he unwrapped the second croquette sandwich.

“I’d say there’s incredible strength in Asuta’s cooking. When you eat his dishes, more power than ever before starts filling you up inside. And that’s been acknowledged not just by the clans under the Ruu, but also by Dari Sauti and the folks from the Fou and Sudra clans.”

“I’ve heard as much from our leading clan head Gulaf Zaza too...”

“Ah, really? Well, making delicious meals requires just a tiny bit of practice. But learning how to bloodlet meat and bake poitan can be done in a single day. For distant clans like the Sauti, we’ve handled things by swapping clan members for a bit to get in the proper training.”

“So you’re saying the northern clans should do the same...?”

“Yeah. As long as you end up with the same number of people on each end, it shouldn’t have any impact on other work, right? I think this is something that will bring greater strength to us people of the forest’s edge, regardless of whether or not you approve of the business being done by the Fa and Ruu clans.”

Deek Dom silently held out his wooden plate toward Lem Dom.

It must have been empty, as the woman stopped listening to Ludo Ruu’s

words with a faint grin and instead headed over to the stove with a shrug of her shoulders.

Now that he thought about it, this house had the stove inside the same building as the living space. Normally with houses the size of the Ruu one, the main house and the kitchen were kept separate.

“The value of delicious cooking has been a matter of discussion even here in the northern settlement...”

“Oh, really?”

“The Deen clan brought up a request. They asked to allow a member of their clan to assist in the Fa clan’s business, to determine whether or not they were correct in their actions... And for the next step, at the next wedding or festival of the hunt, that Deen clan member who learned to cook under the Fa will be invited to man the stove.”

A member of the Deen clan... Ludo Ruu had in fact heard from Asuta about how a girl from one of the Suun branch houses he had met at the clan head meeting was now a member of the Deen. Ludo Ruu’s little sister Lala Ruu seemed to have some sort of bond with the girl too.

“I see. So if she manages to satisfy you, then your people will learn bloodletting and how to cook too?”

“That is not the case. It’s simply about whether or not the Deen will be permitted to be involved with the Fa any further. However, the leading clan head Gulaf Zaza may in fact be thinking even further ahead...” Despite the firm glare in Deek Dom’s eyes, it had been impossible to read what he was feeling whatsoever, and now his gaze narrowed as if he was peering at something. “It was that dinner held at the Ruu settlement, when Zuuro Suun and the others were invited. Something about that night seems to have thrown Gulaf Zaza out of sorts... He did not directly state as such, but he implied that he ate something truly surprising...”

“Oh yeah, that dinner was seriously amazing! For me, it was the greatest meal I’ve ever had in my whole life! Well, at least up until then. That dinner in the castle town three days ago was every bit as incredible too, like some sort of banquet.”

“If it was enough to move the leading clan head Gulaf Zaza so greatly, then that delicious food you speak of is at least worthy of some consideration... I can imagine that much, even as someone who only had a brief brush with its power at the clan head meeting,” Deek Dom replied, slurping down his freshly-poured poitan stew before continuing on. “So...why exactly did you bring this matter to me, youngest son of the Ruu? You should be knocking on the door of the Zaza, not the Dom, wouldn’t you say?”

“Hmm? It’s better to leave the leading clan heads to talk among themselves, right? But I wanted to hear your opinion, as the head of one of the subordinate clans. And it felt like a good topic to add on.”

“Add on...?”

“Yeah. I really wanted to know just what sort of person you were, Deek Dom.” As Ludo Ruu gulped down the aria and chatchi dish, he searched for what to say next. And while thinking to himself that the dish really would be a lot tastier freshly made, he said, “Before that, there’s one question I’d like to ask. How old are you, exactly?”

“I am seventeen...”

“S-Seventeen...? You’re only two years older than me?!”

“The previous clan head passed away out in the forest two years ago, after which I inherited the role as the oldest son. Is there some issue with that?”

“Ah, no, it’s just definitely something, serving as clan head so young... Oh yeah, so that means you’re the same age as Rau Lea, Asuta, and Ai Fa...”

Thinking about it, Rau Lea and Ai Fa were clan heads too. For the former in particular, his Lea clan was also roughly the same size as the Dom.

Well, considering how they have so few house members to help them out, Ai Fa and Shin Ruu may have it tougher in some ways...

At any rate, what he was going to bring up next was what mattered most.

“By the way, you brought up wedding banquets before, but do you have anything happening on that front? If you’re seventeen and the head of the main house, you’ve probably got folks starting to pester you, yeah?”

“I wouldn’t particularly say anyone is pestering me. As long as I take a wife before I’m eighteen, that should be plenty. If I do not find someone I am attracted to before then, I simply need to get together with a similarly unwed woman,” Deek Dom replied in a tone that indicated he found the subject tiresome, grabbing hold of one of the bottles of fruit wine Ludo Ruu had brought. “My thanks for the Ruu clan’s kindness... We just ran out of fruit wine, so this is definitely appreciated.”

“Right, the northern settlement is far from the post town, so purchasing stuff is a pain, isn’t it?”

“Indeed. Though getting a hold of a totos has made things a lot easier.”

Deek Dom gulped down that fruit wine every bit as vigorously as Ludo Ruu’s old man. At this rate, those two bottles would be drained dry in no time flat.

“However, issues have developed in a way that means I cannot take the matter of marriage lightly. There are many under our parent clan who need to form new bonds of blood.”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“Up until now, our parent clan was the Suun. Our bonds of blood were forged with them as the source. With our central Suun clan abolished, that leaves some with no blood ties whatsoever. For example, the only bond the more southerly clans such as the Deen and Liddo had were from offering husbands or wives to the Suun, so they no longer have any blood ties to the northern clans.”

I see, Ludo Ruu thought in sudden recognition. There were six clans under the Ruu, but it wasn’t as if they were all tied directly through blood. Small clans like the Ririn and Maam were accepted as subordinate clans due to their blood ties with the Lea, Rutim, and Min.

But the Lea and Rutim had shared blood with the Ruu for a long, long time, so there was no risk of any clan becoming completely isolated. Yet in the case of the Suun, they had blood ties stretching from the north to the south, and there was no other intermingling between the far extremes.

Furthermore, the Suun clan had refrained from having any of their members marry into other clans for over a decade now, to hide their crime of pillaging

the forest of Morga. That was another factor cutting down the chances the subordinate clans had to exchange blood ties outside of the Suun settlement.

“Hmm... Then are you planning on taking a bride from the Deen or Liddo?”

“It’s not as if that has been decided. But if I do not find anyone by the time I turn eighteen, that will likely be how things play out.”

“You sure are fixated on that age in particular. Is it the custom up north that you need to get married before you’re eighteen?”

“More than being a custom, doesn’t it show that you’re not taking your duty to leave behind strong blood seriously if you do not take a spouse for three whole years after being recognized as a full-fledged hunter at the age of fifteen?”

Ludo Ruu didn’t know the source of that period of three years in particular being important, but it was true that eighteen or nineteen seemed to be the borderline after which you started getting pestered about marriage even in the Ruu settlement.

Still, Gazraan Rutim didn’t get married until he was twenty-three, and Vina’s already twenty...

At any rate, he had the information he needed, and there was just one point left that concerned him.

“So, you’re already seventeen, right? How long do you have till you turn eighteen, then?”

“I only just turned seventeen last month...”

In that case, there should still be over ten months left.

With that, Ludo Ruu was finally able to breathe a sigh of relief.

“So, what is it that you wish to know about me?” Deek Dom questioned, setting down his now empty plate and leaning forward. And as he gulped down the chunk of croquette sandwich he had bitten into, Ludo Ruu shot him a grin.

“Oh, don’t worry about it. I already learned what I wanted to. Seems like you’re a fine hunter, Deek Dom.”

“I don’t exactly understand your meaning...”

“I mean just what I said. You may look just as vicious as Gulaf Zaza, but you’re real open when it comes to talking about stuff, and you seem honest too. Honestly, my older brothers are more stubborn than you are... At the same time, you seem to be an incredibly strong hunter, and I can’t imagine there are many as fine as you here at the forest’s edge.”

“I can’t say I appreciate you calling our leading clan head vicious...”

“Oh, I didn’t mean that in a bad way. My old man’s got just as intense of a face on him, and besides, I respect Gulaf Zaza as a hunter.”

Deek Dom was surely someone worthy of having Morun Rutim fall for him. And sensing that much was plenty for Ludo Ruu.

“That’s all I’ve got to say. Sorry for interrupting your dinner. I’m glad I talked to you today, Deek Dom.”

“I still don’t understand what you’re saying at all, but you couldn’t possibly intend to return to the Ruu settlement now, could you, youngest son of the Ruu?”

“Huh? Of course I do. I’ve got a totos, so it’s not like it’ll take all that long.”

“Don’t be foolish. The paths are dangerous at night.”

“I’ll be fine. When I’m on a totos, not even giba can catch up to me, much less giiz or mundt, so it’s no real danger.”

“So which is more dangerous? The morning or the night?” Deek Dom firmly insisted. “It would bring shame upon the Dom clan if I were to allow you to take such a dangerous path. You aren’t trying to shame us, are you, youngest son of the Ruu?”

“No, but...”

“Lem, prepare bedding in a spare room. And place the guest’s steel in my room.”

“Understood, clan head...”

He might have been honest and a strong hunter, but Ludo Ruu didn’t know

whether this stubborn hospitality was a plus or a minus. But at any rate, the young hunter gave a little sigh.

3

And so, Ludo Ruu ended up spending the night at the main Dom house.

He had told his family that he should be back around when everyone was getting to sleep, but they shouldn't have been all that worried as long as he showed up early in the morning. Still, it was a real miscalculation right at the end.

Well, whatever. All I've got to do now is sleep.

Atop the bedding laid out by Lem Dom, Ludo Ruu gave a hearty stretch.

The room was filled with the smell of fresh wood. It hadn't bugged him all that much back in the main hall, but this must have been one of the houses Zattsu Suun burned down that had to be repaired. The former-leading-clan-head-turned-criminal had fled after biting and tearing out the throat of a Jeen hunter, then he set fire to the Dom settlement and let Diga and Doddoo loose.

Just what were Diga and Doddoo feeling now, having had their crimes pardoned at the meeting with the nobles? Ludo Ruu sort of wanted to go see the looks on their faces, but since there was no good reason to, he thought better of it. And if the fates allowed, he could see them tomorrow morning.

Still, I'm wide awake now, and I don't feel like I'll be getting sleepy for a while yet, Ludo Ruu thought to himself, right before someone knocked on his door.

Hearing that, he sat right up and called out, "It's not bolted," at which point the door opened revealing Lem Dom. There was a bottle of fruit wine dangling from her slender-yet-muscular hand.

"I went out of my way to make sure you had a room with a bolt, but you don't even care enough to use it?"

"You guys have no reason to attack me. So as long as the front door is bolted shut, why would I need to be more cautious than that?"

"Hmph... You seem rather sure of your own strength," Lem Dom retorted,

once again smiling out of the corner of her mouth as she shut the door behind her. “This is the fruit wine you gave us, but would you care to join me tonight?”

“Ah, thanks for the offer, but I’m not that fond of fruit wine.”

“Oh? So there are hunters out there who don’t drink the stuff?”

“Of course. I think I’ve heard that the second son of the main Rutim house can’t handle fruit wine, for one.”

“Hmm... In that case, I guess I’ll have to drink it myself,” Lem Dom replied, sitting down next to the bedding. And as Ludo Ruu stared at the coquettish figure, he tilted his head.

“Umm, isn’t it against the old customs for an unwed man and woman to be alone together in a bedroom at night?”

“Supposedly. But other clans have been letting the old customs die out, haven’t they?”

“Yeah, but you belong to the northern clans that make a big deal out of them, don’t you?”

“If it’s a custom that’s not a crime to break, then what does it matter?” Lem Dom shot back with a faint smile. Despite her seriously wild nature she also possessed clear feminine charm, which really put Ludo Ruu on edge.

Well, it’s not like she’s going to go asking me to marry into the Dom clan or anything...

As a member of the main house of one of the leading clans, Ludo Ruu was expected to marry properly even more than Deek Dom or Morun Rutim. Still, his old man Donda Ruu had planned on having Ai Fa marry into the clan when she had no relation to them at all, so he didn’t seem that fixated on old customs.

“Do you have some sort of business with me? Not that I’m complaining about you coming here, after I showed up and bothered you and your brother like I did. But at least try not to do anything that’ll earn me the clan head’s wrath, okay?”

“Hmm, I may not quite be able to guarantee that...” Lem Dom said with a

smile that seemed to imply something as she took a sip of fruit wine. “Before that, though, there’s something I’d like to confirm... Do you intend to have my clan head take a Ruu woman as his bride, Ludo Ruu?”

“Huh? Why do you think that?”

“It’s hard to think of anything else from what you were saying. Still, my clan head is a late bloomer, so he didn’t seem to pick up on it at all,” Lem Dom stated with a wicked chuckle. Though she possessed a variety of smiles and laughs, they all seemed rather suspicious and somehow arrogant. “Such matters should first be discussed with our parent clan, the Zaza, first, wouldn’t you agree? The Ruu are one of the leading clans, while the Dom fall under yet another leading clan, which means even more so that you cannot go cutting them out of the loop.”

“I wasn’t trying to do that at all. That’s why I said at the start that none of this was coming from my old man, the leading clan head.”

“Then without your father’s permission, you want to be of assistance to some woman of your own volition?”

“Can’t say.”

After drinking another sip of fruit wine, Lem Dom once again broke out in a smile.

“Isn’t that a rather unfair way of putting things?”

“It may be, but I still can’t say. Maybe we should just say it’s better than me lying to you?”

“I see. You have a strong sense of duty, don’t you, Ludo Ruu? Well, not that I especially care as long as you’re not mixing my clan head up in any strange plots.”

“I hope if nothing else, you’ll believe I have no plans to do anything like that.”

As she stared at Ludo Ruu out of the corner of her eye, Lem Dom murmured, “I see... In that case, I suppose it’s fine. But if I overlook that, then could you tell me about the Sauti in exchange?”

“The Sauti? What about the Sauti?”

“Didn’t you say the Ruu exchanged clan members with the far off Sauti so that they could be trained? I’d like to hear more about that.”

“Hmm? It’s nothing all that complicated. The Sauti clan head Dari Sauti wanted to be able to eat delicious meals at home too, so he had his people learn the necessary techniques from the Rutim clan, who fall under the Ruu,” Ludo Ruu replied as he remembered how things had played out. “All that trouble with the nobles put a stop to things for now, but before that, they had two or three clan members swapped with the Rutim. Then the Sauti clan members could be taught at the Rutim settlement, and the Rutim clan members sent to the Sauti settlement could also offer instructions. You can teach how to properly bloodlet and dissect a giba in just a few days like that.”

“That means spending those several days in another clan’s settlement, correct? Is that just a task for men?”

“No, since manning the stove is women’s work. Even if the meat is handled properly, it’d still be ruined if you went and boiled it together with poitan. So at the bare minimum, you’ve got to at least learn to bake poitan to have delicious meals. The Sauti women stayed for a few days at the Rutim settlement too from what I recall.”

Still, with just a few days all you could really learn was how to bake poitan and just a little bit of cooking. That would never be enough to measure up to clans like the Ruu, Fou, and Deen who were able to study directly under Asuta.

“Hmm... And is the Ruu settlement close to the Fa house?”

“Hrmm, that’s a bit hard to say. On a tolos, it’s just a short run. But, well, it’s at least a bit closer than the Suun and Dom settlements are.”

“I see... But the Ruu and Fa share very strong bonds, correct?”

“Yeah. We’re close enough that for this past month or so, Ai Fa and Asuta have been staying at the Ruu settlement for their safety,” Ludo Ruu replied, and then he furrowed his brow. “Hey, why’re you asking about the Fa clan? The Rutim are the ones who’ve been teaching the Sauti. The Fa have nothing to do with it.”

“But if the Dom and Ruu exchanged clan members, could we in turn get close

to the members of the Fa?”

“What would you do if you did?”

“Who can say?”

“Hey...” Ludo Ruu shot back, his eyes narrowing. “Let me just say, if you try to do anything to the Fa clan, you won’t get off lightly even if you are a member of the main Dom house. More than anything else, I hope you completely understand that.”

“Oh, my... You really are a Ruu clan hunter, aren’t you? You’re every bit as intense as the Dom and Zaza men,” Lem Dom replied with another suspicious chuckle. “But unfortunately for you, I’ve had to look at my clan head’s face ever since I was born. So a glare like that in your eyes isn’t enough to scare me.”

“I don’t care about scaring you. Just give me your word that you won’t try to do anything to either of those two in the Fa clan.”

“The Ruu and Fa clans really do have a strong bond, don’t they? Even though there are no blood ties between you... It’s no wonder the leading clan heads have found that suspicious.” Rather than being intimidated, Lem Dom moved her face closer to Ludo Ruu. “I have no intention of making you angry, though. So if I tell you about myself, will you lend me your aid in the future, I wonder...?”

“At least for now, I’ve got no reason to make you any promises.”

“That’s why I’m going to tell you about my circumstances. If I were to go to the Ruu settlement, I would like to form a bond with the head of the Fa clan.”

“With Ai Fa? Why’s that?”

At that, Lem Dom came in close to Ludo Ruu’s ear. As she did so, her womanly scent and the aroma of fruit wine both crept over his senses.

“Don’t tell anyone, but...I want to be a hunter too.”

Ludo Ruu was actually a little shocked when he heard that.

“I inherited the blood of the incredibly strong former Dom clan head, and I’ve already finished off a giba with my own two hands.”

“Huh? Even though you’re a woman?”

“Yes. A starving giba showed up one day in the Dom settlement. It hadn’t grown all that large, and must have been weakened by its hunger, but I slit its throat with a knife.” Lem Dom’s very words seemed filled with heat, causing Ludo Ruu’s ear to feel warm. “It made me think... Wouldn’t it be possible for even a woman like me to gain the strength of a hunter? That’s why I want to meet with Ai Fa of the Fa clan, the only female hunter at the forest’s edge.”

“I see. Well, I guess I can understand that.”

Ludo Ruu pulled back, and Lem Dom did the same in turn.

Her big slightly-upturned eyes were moist, but fiery. She looked both more seductive and more daring than she ever had before.

“So, do you believe me? It feels like the sort of thing that would just earn me scornful laughs if I told anyone.”

“Well, I mean, I’m plenty well acquainted with Ai Fa, y’know? So it makes sense to me that there could be other women out there around the forest’s edge thinking that way.”

“What sort of woman is Ai Fa? From what I’ve heard, she’s supposedly small and thin in a way that makes it hard to believe she’s a hunter,” Lem Dom asked, sidling up to Ludo Ruu again.

The young hunter replied, “Hmm...” as he scratched his head. “I don’t really know how to answer that... Well, it’s true that she’s smaller and thinner than you are. Even still, she’s just a tiny bit taller than I am.”

“And yet she still carries out her work as a hunter? And her only clan member is that foreigner Asuta who mans the stove, right?”

“Yeah. For two years now, Ai Fa has been hunting all on her own. It may sound foolish and dangerous, but I respect her.”

“Hmm... In that case, it sounds like I could be a hunter too.”

“I’m not so sure...” Ludo Ruu replied, looking Lem Dom over again.

She was unusually tall for a woman, and had plenty of muscle too. Her breasts and backside seemed like they’d get in the way, but she would also probably be

really good at running and climbing trees.

But that wasn't all there was to being a strong hunter...

"By the way, how old are you, Lem Dom?"

"I am fifteen."

"Fifteen, huh? That's the same age as me." Well, considering her older brother Deek Dom was seventeen, that was no real shock at this point. "Hmm, let's see... If you trained like crazy, then maybe you'd be strong enough to be a hunter in two years."

"Oh, my, it would take two whole years?"

"That's right. I met Ai Fa two years ago, when she was also fifteen."

That was back when Ai Fa had lost her father and formed bad blood with Diga. When Donda Ruu had gone to the Fa house to ask if she would marry into the Ruu, Ludo Ruu and his big brothers had come along and met her.

Back then, Ai Fa had been even smaller and thinner than she was now. Ludo Ruu figured she was even smaller than he currently was. She didn't have as much muscle as Lem Dom did now. In fact, she looked like she probably couldn't even properly swing a sword. And yet she had declared that she intended to live as a hunter and rejected the marriage proposal.

Ludo Ruu had only just become a hunter at the age of thirteen, and he had thought she was an absolute fool of a woman. And that it was a real waste, considering how pretty of a face she had.

And yet, that small and beautiful woman had the look of a hunter blazing away in her blue eyes, and she stood there before Ludo Ruu's furious old man without so much as flinching.

Apparently, Ai Fa had helped out with hunting work ever since she was thirteen. And so even though she still hadn't built up the proper strength needed, her soul was already that of a hunter.

"When she was fifteen, Ai Fa had already trained for two years as a hunter. So I figured you could probably polish up your hunter's soul in about two years too."

“My hunter’s soul? I don’t really get it... That isn’t something you can see with your eyes, is it?”

“The fact that you can’t see it is what makes it so hard to nurture.”

“Hmph. But regardless of anything to do with your soul, as long as you’re strong enough, you can hunt down giba, can’t you? Isn’t muscle strength what’s most important?”

There was now finally a blaze burning away in Lem Dom’s eyes.

However, all Ludo Ruu could do in response was shrug his shoulders.

“It could be tricky to become a hunter as long as you’re thinking stuff like that. Still, you’ve got a pretty face and all, so wouldn’t you be happier just sticking to living like other women?”

“A woman’s life is boring...” Lem Dom replied, placing her hand on Ludo Ruu’s side. By doing so, she naturally slid in closer. “From morning to night you just gather firewood, dry pico leaves, skin pelts... And beyond that, at most you’ll have relations with a man and strive to make babies. But I...I want to experience a life more fitting for a person of the forest’s edge, all the way down to my core...”

Ludo Ruu could feel her warm breath on his face. Her large breasts were just barely touching his chest. And though he tried to fall back, the wall was right behind him.

“But lives like that are important for us people of the forest’s edge too. Giving birth to children is a form of happiness only women can experience, right?”

“Then will you help me experience that happiness...?”

“Come on, it’s not like we can sprint ahead with getting married without even asking for permission from our clan heads.”

“That’s true... In that case, how about indulging purely in pleasure while taking care not to make any kids...?”

It was hard to imagine those words were coming from a member of the northern clans, which highly valued the old customs.

Her plump, glistening lips hung partially open, and her red tongue that could

just barely be seen within was so seductive it gave Ludo Ruu chills. The pure feminine allure she was giving off felt like it was filling the room and making it a little hard to breathe.

“Guess there’s no helping it...” Ludo Ruu murmured, suddenly grabbing hold of both of Lem Dom’s shoulders.

Though she was muscular like a man, her skin was amazingly smooth, like his fingers would gently sink into it.

There was now an even more suspicious yet passionate look in Lem Dom’s eyes. And as he stared straight into her black pupils, Ludo Ruu firmly pushed her down atop the bedding.

“All right, I win.”

“Huh...?”

“This contest of strength between hunters. Your back touched the ground, so you lose.”

For a moment, Lem Dom just stared blankly up at Ludo Ruu. And then, her expression eventually grew angry.

“Ludo Ruu...are you trying to shame me...?”

“You can take pride in winning a contest of strength, but it’s no shame to lose.”

“Don’t mess with me. If you’re sitting to start with, exactly how can it be a contest of strength?”

“Yeah, the proper way to do it is to stand and face each other. But us men do it like this in the bedroom when we’re young. It’s partially just playing around, but it makes for fine training too, right?”

Like some sort of beast, Lem Dom suddenly lunged forward and grabbed at Ludo Ruu.

And yet, both her hands grabbed nothing but air as Ludo Ruu spun while sitting, leaving Lem Dom to once again fall to the bedroom floor.

“See, I win. It’s pretty tricky to dodge an opponent while sitting, isn’t it?”

Thanks to the gap in their ages, Ludo Ruu couldn't remember ever beating his brothers at this game. However, he also couldn't recall ever losing to the members of the branch houses who were his age.

"You little...!"

"Ah, lifting your knees is cheating."

As he said that, Ludo Ruu placed his hand on Lem Dom's right hand with her nails up like claws, then let her attack flow past him as he twisted his body. Her momentum then pitched her forward and she once again hit the floor.

"Yeah, you really are shockingly strong and quick for a woman. I actually could see you becoming a hunter if you trained."

Lem Dom didn't say anything in response.

"Well, some stuff's hard to get with words alone. It'd probably be quickest for you to meet Ai Fa directly so you can see the difference between the two of you."

Lem Dom just slowly stood up in silence, her back turned to Ludo Ruu.

"I'll never forget this humiliation..."

"Huh? Are you crying?"

"I am not!"

At that, Lem Dom snatched up the bottle of fruit wine that had fallen to the floor and swiftly exited the bedroom.

With a single yawn, Ludo Ruu flopped back down atop the bedding.

Hmm, there sure are some strange folks out there.

Still, considering Ludo Ruu was already close to Ai Fa and Asuta, this hadn't made for all that big of a shock. And since he got in a bit of exercise there at the end, he felt like he would be able to sleep soundly.

With the thick womanly scent that lingered heavily about the room starting to disperse, Ludo Ruu closed his eyes.

“So at least for now, it doesn’t seem like Deek Dom has anyone he wants to take as a bride. Looks like his plan is to take it easy and look for a fitting woman until he turns eighteen.”

It was now the following evening. Ludo Ruu was giving his report to Morun Rutim, who was once again visiting the Ruu settlement.

“And the folks up north are going to give some definite thought as to how they want to handle the matter of tasty cooking, so depending on how that goes, they may end up asking to exchange members with the clans under the Ruu like the Sauti did. If that happens, you may have another chance to form a bond with Deek Dom.”

“H-Hold on, Ludo Ruu...”

“Still, the northern settlement’s built in a pretty dangerous place. You get mundt and stuff popping up on the outskirts of the forest, and apparently it isn’t even that rare for giba to wander into the settlement. I gave some advice that for the women’s safety, they should clear out some of their encroaching trees and build a fence or something. I mean, even if you like the guy, we can’t go sending you off to such a dangerous place.”

“Ludo Ruu! I said hold on!”

“Hmm? What is it?”

“I had my suspicions when I heard about your trip from Ama Min after she returned from the Ruu settlement this morning...but did you really head up north for a reason like that?!”

“What do you mean ‘a reason like that’? This is a huge deal for you.”

“Th-That’s true, but...” Morun Rutim murmured, her cheeks turning red. However, her adorable plump face was still shooting Ludo Ruu a reproachful look. “But up until the Suun clan fell, the Ruu and the northern clans were bitter enemies, right? It’s dangerous spending the night in a place like that!”

“It wasn’t dangerous at all. And if it was, that’d be all the more reason we couldn’t let you go.”

“You didn’t go all the way there on your own just to confirm that, did you...?”

“Of course not. I just wanted to know what sort of person Deek Dom really was. After all, I couldn’t just let you go off and marry some weak-willed guy,” Ludo Ruu replied with a grin. “But, well, as far as I could see, he seemed like a great man. Maybe a bit hardheaded, but not so bad for someone from up north. But you’ll have to confirm the rest with your own two eyes.”

“Ludo Ruu, I can’t believe you...” Morun Rutim sighed. “Maybe it’s because all the men in my family have such imposing builds, but I seem to be drawn to guys like that...”

“Ooh yeah, Dan Rutim and Gazraan Rutim really do stand out.”

“If it weren’t for that, I’d probably have ended up wanting to marry you, Ludo Ruu...”

“What, so even you’re calling me a runt now, Morun Rutim?” Ludo Ruu frowned, only for the girl to shoot him back a gentle smile.

“Still, I’d say I was really lucky to be born close to someone as kind and reliable as you.”

“Cut it out. That’s embarrassing.”

“But it’s the truth,” Morun Rutim replied, smiling even brighter.

It was then that the door to the main house swung open behind them.

“Ah, I finally found you, Ludo! I’m starving, so let’s hurry up and get dinner started.”

It was the youngest daughter of the main house, Rimee Ruu.

Turning her way, Ludo Ruu stuck out his tongue.

“Quiet, you. Don’t go interrupting important discussions. If you’re hungry, then just go gnaw on a wooden spoon or something.”

“What the heck, stupid runty Ludo?! You’re just a stupid runt!”

“Do you not know any insults but ‘stupid’ and ‘runt’?”

“Shut up! If you don’t hurry up, I’ll eat your dinner too!”

With that, the door slammed shut.

“Hee hee hee,” Ludo Ruu chuckled, until Morun Rutim came in closer to him with a somewhat worried look.

“Hey, Ludo Ruu... It probably goes without saying at this point, but it’s worrying me, so there’s something I feel the need to say...”

“Hmm? What is it?”

“No matter how cute she may be and how much you may adore her, you can’t marry your little sister, you know.”

Instantly, the blood rushed to Ludo Ruu’s face.

“Wh-Why are you spouting stupid stuff like that?! How is that cheeky little crybaby Rimee cute?! You’re being weird, Morun Rutim!”

“Well, if I was mistaken then there’s no worry,” she answered with a smile meant to pacify Ludo Ruu as she patted him on the shoulder. “I hope you meet a girl you’ll find even more adorable and precious than Rimee Ruu soon.”

“Shut up!” Ludo Ruu shouted, his voice echoing throughout the darkening Ruu settlement.

It was the fourth of the ashen month at the time. News of the capture of Cyclopeus’s underlings, those outlaws in the Winds of Black Death, would be delivered the following day.

Chapter 2: The Deen Clan Chef

1

It was morning as Toor Deen hurried down a path at the forest's edge.

Well, to be more precise, it was actually before dawn. The sun still hadn't yet appeared from beyond the forest, and the world was awash in a dim bluish grey. She had actually wanted to take care of her business last night, but thanks to a strong rebuke from her clan member Jas Deen, she eagerly awaited daybreak to go flying out of the house.

As she ran along gasping for breath, her destination finally came into view. It was a small wooden house, isolated from the ones around it... The Fa house, home to Ai Fa the female hunter and the foreign chef Asuta.

While she wiped the sweat from her brow, Toor Deen stopped and stood in front of the door. Then just as she was about to knock, her natural timidity started showing itself.

Won't I be causing trouble for them, showing up at this time of day...?

She had visited this place because there was something that she wanted to tell Asuta. But while the news was greatly important to Toor Deen herself, it was hard to say how significant it would be for the members of the Fa clan.

Thanks to her hesitation, Toor Deen instead ended up circling around to the side of the house.

Are they already awake...? As long as they aren't asleep, then I shouldn't be imposing too much... she thought as she cautiously peered in through the window. That was quite impolite in and of itself, but she figured it was much better than knocking without knowing what things were like inside.

Between the wooden lattice, she could spy the inside of the room, where it was even dimmer than it was outside. The giba pelt spread out on the floor, the stove, the pot, the water jug...and the pair of figures huddled close together as

they slept.

When she saw that, Toor Deen hurriedly ducked her head and squatted down on the ground.

Huh...? Why are they sleeping in the main hall?

She had finally managed to get her heartbeat under control, but now it was starting to run wild again.

Asuta and Ai Fa had fallen asleep right in the middle of the house's front room. And if Toor Deen hadn't seen wrong, Ai Fa had been tightly hugging Asuta's left arm and resting her head on his shoulder.

Th-They aren't married, right? So why are they sleeping all huddled together like that...?

Suddenly, Toor Deen realized her cheeks had grown warm. She felt like she had seen something she wasn't supposed to.

Did I just see wrong...? It is pretty dark inside... Toor Deen thought as she timidly stood back up and once again brought her face in close to the window.

And when she did so, she found blue eyes with a very firm light in them staring back from beyond the lattice.

"Aah!" Toor Deen shrieked as she fell on her bottom. And those blue eyes followed that unbecoming display without so much as blinking.

"You're that girl from the Deen clan, are you not? What brings you here at this time of day?"

It was Ai Fa. Up until just a moment ago she had been peacefully sleeping away, but now she was staring directly at Toor Deen.

"What's up? Is there someone outside the window?" a voice called out with a yawn, and before long Asuta appeared next to Ai Fa. "Oh, so it was you, Toor Deen. What's going on?"

His voice was just as calm and kind as always. But even so, Toor Deen was unable to raise herself to her feet for a while yet.



“I sensed a presence outside the window, so I went to look and found this girl peering inside the house,” Ai Fa matter-of-factly stated, sitting there cross-legged with one knee up in the air. “Well, I assumed it wasn’t anyone who meant us harm because she hadn’t been trying to hide her breathing, but still, it was a bit of a surprise.”

Ai Fa might have claimed as much, but Toor Deen had definitely been about a million times more shocked.

As he sat there beside Ai Fa, Asuta gave an astounded chuckle.

“You sure are one reliable clan head. I didn’t sense her in the slightest. And you must have been surprised too, right, Toor Deen?”

“N-No... I’m really sorry for so rudely peering inside your house...”

Currently, they were in the main hall of the Fa house. Since she seemed to have some sort of business with them, Ai Fa and Asuta had invited Toor Deen inside. And as she sensed the gaze of the totos balled up by the entrance on her back, the young girl could feel herself shrinking in on herself.

“So, what brings you here so early in the morning? Do you have some sort of urgent business with us?”

“Y-Yes... Y-You see, um...a Liddo woman will soon be marrying into the Jeen clan...” Toor Deen replied, her head hanging way down as she looked up at the pair between her bangs.

When she said that, Asuta tilted his head and responded, “The Jeen are one of the northern clans, aren’t they? And the Liddo and Deen are relatives, so both fall under the Zaza, huh?”

“T-That’s right. The Liddo and Deen are the southernmost clans under the Zaza... They were relatives even before exchanging blood ties with the Suun.”

“Yeah, I heard about that just a little while ago. Still, there’s quite a distance between here and the northern settlement.”

“That’s true... And it’s why up until now the Deen and Liddo only had ties with the Suun, hardly interacting at all with the other northern clans... Now that the Suun clan are gone, there are no blood ties left at all, which made it necessary

to form new bonds with the north.”

“Ooh, so that’s why that Liddo woman is marrying into the Jeen?”

“Yes... The Jeen clan had dispatched a number of young men to instruct the branch families remaining at the Suun settlement on how to hunt...and apparently the Liddo woman was invited there too, which is how the matchmaking happened.”

“I see, so it was a result of matchmaking! If it led to a marriage proposal, then that sounds like a happy ending, right?” Asuta replied with a truly gentle smile, and then he tilted his head again. “Okay, so it’s definitely a joyful occasion for them, but why did you come to tell us about it?”

“Well, you see...” Toor Deen mumbled, shrinking further, “I was... No, we Deen women were asked to man the stove for the wedding banquet...”

“Hmm?” Asuta nodded along only for his eyes to suddenly shoot open wide. “Huh? But the Deen clan has been following my cooking instructions and using bloodlet giba meat, right? If they went and specifically asked the Deen to man the stove, then...”

“Yes. Gulaf Zaza, he said...that he was entrusting the Deen clan with manning the stove to determine just how much strength there was to be had from the cooking you brought to the forest’s edge, Asuta.”

“That’s amazing! They’ve given you such an important task!” Asuta exclaimed, his eyes sparkling as he leaned forward. When she saw that, the tension that had built up throughout Toor Deen’s body finally drained away.

“The news should also be delivered to the Ruu and Sauti clans today. I wanted to let you two know myself before that, and that’s why I ended up visiting at such an hour... I really am sorry.”

“You’ve got no need to apologize at all! That’s seriously amazing!” Asuta exclaimed, once again smiling. “And it really does make me happy that you thought to go out of your way to come visit us like this. Thanks, Toor Deen.”

“O-Oh, it was nothing...”

Those words alone were enough to make Toor Deen feel like her efforts had

been worthwhile. They affected her so much that she found herself moved to tears, and so she hung her head even lower to hide that.

“Did you hear, Ai Fa? Gulaf Zaza of all people finally has that much of an interest in tasty food! This is seriously good news!”

“Indeed. That dinner to which Zuuro Suun and his former family were invited must have quite thoroughly displayed your strength to the man. That goes to show how impactful of a meal it really was,” Ai Fa calmly replied. Still, there was an obvious note of pride in Asuta mixed into her words. “Deen child, allow me to also offer my thanks for coming at the break of dawn to deliver the news.”

“A-Ah, it was nothing... There’s something I would also like to ask of you, Fa clan head Ai Fa...” Toor Deen said, placing a hand over the pounding left side of her chest. “We Deen women have been discussing just what sort of dish we should create, and, um...so that Asuta can judge if it seems like the proper one to go with...w-will you please allow me to cook dinner for the Fa clan tonight?!” she asked, her voice becoming unnecessarily loud at the end.

As the girl timidly raised her gaze...she found Ai Fa staring back with a far gentler look in her eyes than expected.

“I do not mind at all. In fact, I am terribly interested to see what sort of dish you Deen women will be making as well.”



Toor Deen had come into this world as a member of a Suun branch house.

Her mother was the youngest sister of the Deen’s clan head, and she had married into the Suun clan.

At the time, the Suun had been the leading clan, so it should have been something to be proud of. However, the Suun had broken the taboos of the forest’s edge and become a clan bound by the sinister rules put in place by the former leading clan head Zattsu Suun.

Those rules had been established several years before the now ten-year-old Toor Deen was born. So for her, she had those secret demands driven into her for her whole life. The adults of the Suun settlement had constantly said that if other clans were to find out that secret, every last one of them would be

scalped.

Why were the leading Suun clan the only ones forced to keep such a secret? It was to defeat the treacherous Ruu clan, and to gain the strength needed to keep the vicious northern clans firmly under control. Or at least, that was what Toor Deen had been told.

That was what was right. The Suun clan needed to lead the people of the forest's edge down the proper path to the future. And so, for now they needed to keep that secret, no matter how painful it might be... The adults all said as much, with vacant looks in their eyes. Whenever the subordinate clans were invited to the settlement for a banquet or the like, they all looked so fierce and brimming with strength, while the members of the Suun clan seemed to have all spirit drained out of them.

But to Toor Deen, that was simply the way of the world. Her mother had been unable to bear such a life and passed away, leaving behind a young Toor Deen, but the girl wasn't even permitted to grieve over that fact.

And then, Asuta and the Ruu women appeared.

On the night of the clan head meeting, the Suun clan's secret was exposed. And with that, Toor Deen's world came crumbling down.

Now, everyone would be scalped. Though that fact caused her to despair, Toor Deen still felt an indescribable sense of liberation even so.

She could go to her mother's side, and she would no longer have to fear the gazes of other clans. With such thoughts in mind, Toor Deen was finally able to bawl her eyes out. She hadn't had such an outburst of emotion since she was just a baby.

However, Toor Deen and her fellow clan members weren't punished. The members of the main house were stripped of their clan names, but the members of the branch houses were permitted to join clans with which they had strong blood ties. And then, they were trusted to live proper lives as people of the forest's edge in order to atone.

As a result, Toor Deen ended up joining the Deen clan along with her father. There, she began a new life, surrounded by a new family that was strict, yet

kind.

Roughly two months had passed between then and now.

The Zaza clan who had taken over from the Suun as their parent clan now expressed doubts as to the Fa clan's actions. However, though it took some doing, the Deen clan had gained permission to learn bloodletting and cooking techniques from Asuta. Would the Fa clan's actions be medicine or a poison for the forest's edge? The Deen were granted special permission to form ties with the Fa in order to determine just that.

And so, that led to the current state of things.

What had the Deen gained from the Fa clan? Gulaf Zaza, head of the Zaza who were now one of the new leading clans, had ordered them to show just that. If they screwed up, it could be like proving that the Fa clan was in the wrong. And so as she felt like she would be crushed by that pressure, Toor Deen resolved herself to prepare for the wedding banquet.

2

On that day, the thirteenth of the ashen month, Toor Deen once again visited the Fa house in the evening, pulling a board with a large pot and enough ingredients for three people behind her. However, when she got there she only found the clan head, Ai Fa.

"Ah, thank you for coming, Deen child."

Ai Fa was on the side of the house, swinging her sword again and again. The Fa clan had entered into a break period yesterday just as the Deen had done, so she must have been getting in some training as a hunter. And as Ai Fa lowered her blade, she gently glanced at Toor Deen.

"Feel free to use the stove, firewood, and pots however you please. And I refilled the water jug this morning."

"Th-Thank you. So Asuta still hasn't returned from the post town yet...?"

"Indeed. He said he would not return today until just before the sun set."

"Huh? Not until the sun's setting?"

“Yes. Since he is leaving tonight’s dinner to you, he decided to spend as much time as possible giving cooking lessons in the Ruu settlement.”

Toor Deen was left at a loss for words.

And when she saw that, Ai Fa tilted her head.

“What is the matter? Could it perhaps be that you need Asuta’s assistance to prepare dinner?”

“N-No. If I asked for that, there wouldn’t be any point, so I intend to follow through on my own...”

Still, Toor Deen hadn’t ever talked much with Ai Fa before, which left her feeling more than a little daunted. But as the hunter sheathed her blade, she nodded to the young girl.

“Do not worry. If you need to carry anything heavy, I will lend you my aid. I manned the stove until Asuta joined my house, so I shouldn’t make any mistakes that would cause you trouble.”

“R-Right, thank you...”

“Will you be using the indoor stove or the outdoor one? I stocked both with firewood to be safe.”

“Oh, then I think I would like to use the outdoor stove.”

When Ai Fa guided her around behind the house, Toor Deen’s eyes widened a bit in shock.

There were two stoves behind the Fa house. A large leather roof stretched out above them, and next to them there were logs and wooden boards forming a workstation right up against the wall of the house.

Toor Deen had visited the Fa house just a few days prior to receive cooking lessons from Asuta, but there hadn’t been anything like this.

And when she noticed Toor Deen’s gaze, Ai Fa said, “Ah, right. For some time now Asuta and I have discussed the need to have a roof and workstation for the outdoor stoves. And since we finally entered this break period, we were able to make it happen.”

“B-But your break period only started yesterday, didn’t it? You were able to complete all this in just two days?”

“Indeed. I have not had much to keep me busy besides training,” Ai Fa replied as she knocked on the surface of the workstation. “It took a bit of time to join this stand together so that the logs were not slanted, but I do not believe aria or poitan will roll off of it. If you find it stable enough, feel free to use it.”

“R-Right, thank you.”

The height must have been adjusted to come up to around Asuta’s waist. That made it a bit high for Toor Deen, but it still seemed like it would make things easier than laying out a sheet on the ground to sit on while working.

“W-Well then, allow me to get started.”

As Ai Fa watched over her, Toor Deen placed the ingredients she had brought along with her onto the workstation. First up came the prep work for the soup dish.

“Hup,” she grunted as she lifted the pot to the stovetop.

Peering inside the pot, Ai Fa murmured, “Oh...? Are those giba entrails?”

“Yes. The Deen men took it down roughly two days ago. And it seems that entrails will last for around five days when preserved with pico leaves...”

“I see. You’re the one who taught Asuta how to handle entrails, aren’t you, Deen child?” Ai Fa remarked with a satisfied nod, her gaze remaining fixed on the pot. “Still, you seem to have quite the variety packed in here. Asuta separates the different types before grilling or boiling them, but for this dish you will be cooking them all together?”

“Y-Yes. I thought it would be best not to make the steps too complicated if I was planning on teaching them to the northern clans...”

Nearly all the edible innards was packed into the pot. From what Asuta had said, they would be the heart, liver, large and small intestines, stomach, rectum, uterus, lungs, kidneys, diaphragm, and so on. The Fa clan chef had been so kind as to teach her the name and purpose of each in the breaks during cooking lessons.

“To start with, I’ll use giba fat and lightly grill these...” Toor Deen explained as she worked, since Ai Fa seemed quite interested in what she was doing. It was rather embarrassing since it felt like she was imitating Asuta, but she also felt that as the Fa clan head, Ai Fa should also know the contents of the dish. “Then once it’s heated through to some degree, I’ll boil it in tarapa sauce.”

She had prepared that in advance back on her own stove. It had involved finely dicing aria and myamuu and then boiling those together with fruit wine and pico leaves to make the tarapa sauce. And now, Toor Deen transferred that into the pot from the leather bag Jas Deen had bought in the post town.

“Hmm... That seems to be the same way that Asuta makes boiled tarapa dishes.”

“R-Right... So, at this point I decided to try adding lilo leaves and chitt seeds.”

“Chitt seeds...?” Ai Fa’s eyes swiftly narrowed.

Seeing that, Toor Deen flinched and unwittingly stopped adding the lilo leaves and chitt seeds.

“S-Since many different giba innards have unique flavors to them, I wanted to add the strong aroma of lilo and chitt... Umm, is there some sort of concern with that?”

“No, of course not... But wouldn’t using too many unfamiliar ingredients in a dish meant for the simple folks up north be an issue? After all, those chitt seeds come from the Eastern Kingdom of Sym, do they not?”

“Y-Yes. But chitt seeds aren’t as rare or expensive as tau oil, so we use them regularly now in the Deen clan. I think the northern clans probably won’t be all that opposed to them...”

“I see. It seems you’ve thought this through carefully. My apologies for interrupting your work. Please, go ahead and resume,” Ai Fa replied, yet her brow still remained furrowed.

“Umm...are you perhaps not fond of chitt seeds, Ai Fa...?”

“That is not the case. However, when I first had them, it proved quite painful for me,” Ai Fa answered in a sulking tone. “Ever since, when I hear their name

or smell them, I recall that experience. But do not worry, it's not as if I hate dishes that use chitt seeds."

"I-I see... That certainly sounds tough..."

The small red chitt seeds were a powerfully spicy ingredient. Still, as long as you didn't mess up the amount, they could give a dish a suitable punch, just like with pico leaves. Nobody in the Deen clan disliked them at all, so it seemed quite unusual to Toor Deen that Ai Fa was making such a pained expression.

I certainly don't think Asuta would mess up with the amounts... What in the world could have happened? the girl wondered as she stirred the contents of the pot.

The lilo leaves she added along with the chitt seeds were an herb used when making jerky. Asuta said it should be used when you want to suppress the taste of the meat, which was why Toor Deen decided to use it in her offal soup dish.

And as for the myamuu, she used more of it in the tarapa sauce than she did with other dishes. She figured that by adding such a thoroughly strong aroma to the dish, that should make it easier to handle for people eating giba innards for the first time.

"Then I just need to let it boil slowly over a low heat, and finally adjust the flavor with salt and pico leaves. In the meantime, I'd like to prepare the other dishes..."

"Right."

"First up is the meatballs and the stir-fried vegetables."

"So, meatballs rather than hamburger steak?"

"Yes. They take less effort than hamburger steak, so we make a lot of meatballs in the Deen clan."

After mincing the organ meat, she then thoroughly kneaded it with salt and pico leaves. It was also possible to make them with poitan or fuwano flour, or even kimyuus egg, but this time around she didn't add anything. If you kneaded them till they were nice and sticky at this stage, there wasn't much risk of them crumbling.

“The stir-fried vegetable dish uses aria, tino, pula, and nenon.”

“Hmm, that certainly sounds luxurious.”

“Right. Since it’s a wedding banquet, such extravagance should be acceptable.”

Asuta had said that color was important too when it came to cooking. When you used ingredients like dark green pula and pale vermilion nenon, just frying them was enough to make for a gorgeous dish.

When Toor Deen started making the sauce to drizzle over the meatballs, Ai Fa called out to her again. “Deen child, now that I think about it, I have yet to learn your name. If you do not mind, could you tell me?”

“Huh...? I-I’m Toor Deen...”

“Toor Deen, is it? It’s a fine, gentle-sounding name.” As Ai Fa made that uncharacteristic statement, she walked over closer to the young chef. “Toor Deen, though you must not have had as much time to form a bond with Asuta as the Ruu women, you still seem to think highly of him.”

“Eh..?” Toor Deen almost tried to shrink away. But since she was boiling down the fruit wine sauce at the moment, she couldn’t do so. “I-It’s true that I respect Asuta... B-But those are my earnest feelings, and I don’t believe they’re anything to be ashamed of...”

“That’s true, of course. And that is precisely why I wanted to tell you this,” Ai Fa stated with a serious look, moving even closer. Toor Deen felt like her legs were on the verge of trembling.

However, the expression that then crossed Ai Fa’s face was a rather awkward smile.

“I’m proud to hear that Asuta is so precious to you. I would like to thank you for those kind feelings.”

“Huh...? What exactly are you talking about...?” Toor Deen asked, now utterly perplexed as she moved the sauce over to the plate of meatballs before it burned.

And as she looked at the girl, Ai Fa’s eyes just narrowed further as she smiled.

“When Asuta was safely rescued from that noble manor and returned to the settlement, you shed tears of joy, did you not? It truly moved me to see that you were so earnestly worried about him.”

“Th-That was, I mean... My emotions just came bubbling up...”

The day after Asuta was saved from the noble manor, he was staying at the Ruu settlement, and he let Toor Deen and everyone else see he was okay. The young girl had broken down crying.

After Asuta was kidnapped by those fiends, nobody knew where he was for five whole days, which caused Toor Deen to worry so much that it seemed like it would tear her apart. And so, when she saw he was okay, she was so full of joy and relief that she clung to his chest and wept. Just remembering that was enough to cause Toor Deen to blush so hard she felt like her whole body was ablaze.

“It is nothing to be ashamed of. It’s Asuta’s fault for worrying you so much. So please, allow me to offer both an apology and thanks on behalf of my bungling clan member.”

“N-No, that’s...”

“And on top of that, your heartfelt wish to receive lessons from Asuta moved Gulaf Zaza’s heart in turn. Perhaps it is all thanks to the forest’s guidance,” Ai Fa stated, looking up at the sky as it steadily turned scarlet. “Well then, it seems the sun will be setting soon. I believe it would be best to finish up the rest of the cooking inside the house, but what do you say?”

“Y-Yes, I’ll go ahead and do just that,” Toor Deen replied, feeling more than a little surprised. She had never even dreamed that Ai Fa possessed such a warm, kind heart.

Of course, it wasn’t as if Toor Deen had believed Ai Fa was heartless either. Still, she had ignored the objections of everyone around her and chosen to live as a hunter despite being a woman. And so Toor Deen had expected her to be just as stoic as any man, with a heart that wouldn’t be easily moved.

And yet, she smiled like that at me of all people... That makes me really happy, somehow, Toor Deen thought to herself as she carried the completed dishes

and the rest of the ingredients into the house.

Just then, she heard the sound of a wagon rolling closer.

3

“Hey there, Toor Deen. How’s the cooking going?” Asuta asked with a smile as he descended from his wagon in front of the house.

Toor Deen nodded back, her face still red from the conversation a moment ago. “Hello. I just have one more dish to finish. Did it go well today, Asuta?”

“Yep, sure did. Ah, Ai Fa, I’m back.”

“Right.”

Ai Fa was standing there in the doorway of the house with her arms crossed, staring at Asuta with an expression fitting for a clan head. And yet, in spite of the look on her face, there was a very gentle gaze to her eyes.

She must have been truly overjoyed that Asuta had safely returned. The conflict with the nobles might have been settled, but there was still some degree of danger to people of the forest’s edge heading into the post town.

“Well then, time for me to get started on that final dish,” Toor Deen declared, lighting the indoor stove while Asuta tidied up.

As the young chef transferred the giba lard she had brought from the Deen house into the pot, Ai Fa peered inside and commented, “Oh...? Is the final dish you’re preparing giba cutlets?”

“No, it would be difficult to prepare those with my level of skill, and that goes even more so for the women of the north. This is a simpler fried dish.”

Naturally, it was one that Asuta had taught her how to prepare. Though giba cutlets had apparently earned quite a high regard in the Ruu settlement, they were not only difficult to prepare, but also required a variety of ingredients. And that was why Asuta proposed this dish.

“What should I call it? Meunière-style shallow-fried giba, I guess?” Asuta had once mused.

The dish involved rubbing salt and pico leaves into flat slices of meat, covering them in fuwano or poitan flour, then frying them up in lard.

Steak and hamburger steak used just a bit of fat to grill. Cutlets and croquettes were immersed in heated oil to fry. Shallow frying was a method that fell somewhere between those two.

The meat was the cut from the back that Asuta called sirloin. It was initially about as thick as Toor Deen's palm, and she then beat it with a wooden pole until it was about two-thirds that thickness. Asuta had said making it that thick would give it a proper chewiness and allow it to heat through quickly so it wouldn't suck up excess oil.

Next, Toor Deen flavored it with salt and pico leaves, coated it in poitan flour, and then dipped it into the heated lard. The depth of the lard was enough so that the meat was left half-submerged.

The oil crackled pleasantly. The giba cutlets Asuta had once let her taste really were unbelievably delicious, but Toor Deen believed this shallow-fried meat was plenty tasty too.

"Ah, you're frying? In that case, use this," Asuta said, coming out of the pantry holding some sort of strange tool. It was like a flat board made by joining together thin metal rods, which left it with a lot of openings.

"This is called a wire mesh. If you place the fried meat on top of it, the excess oil will drip off."

"Thank you. I'll go ahead and use it, then."

As she moved the cooked meat to the mesh, she added the next piece of meat to the pot. And by that point, Asuta was also standing next to the stove.

"Rounded pots are real inconvenient with how you have to cook the pieces one by one in when you're shallow frying, right? So we're planning on buying a saucepan for the Fa house."

"A-A saucepan?"

"Yeah. It's a type of pan with a flat bottom. You don't see them that often in the post town, but they were more commonly used back in my home country."

Just what sort of country *had* Asuta come from? After all, he claimed he was nothing but a chef-in-training there. Toor Deen couldn't help but find that rather hard to believe, though.

"All right, that should do it. Sorry for making you wait."

"You've got nothing to apologize for. And this is my first time eating your cooking, so I'm looking forward to it."

When she heard those words, Toor Deen got a knot in her stomach, and her ears and cheeks felt hot.

But at any rate, the cooking was done. After transferring the meat to a wooden plate once the oil dripped off, she went ahead and laid everything out atop the carpet in the main hall. Giba offal soup, giba meatballs, stir fry using four different vegetables, and shallow-fried giba sirloin... Then when she added the poitan baked in the house, everything was ready.

For the shallow-fried meat, she also sprinkled the juice from a slice of sheel overtop. That sour fruit juice really paired well with the dish, which packed in the delicious flavor of the giba meat.

"We'll also be preparing normal grilled meat on the day of the banquet too, but these are all of the more elaborate dishes we'll be offering."

"Yup, looks like a real extravagant lineup. It certainly doesn't lose out to what I prepared for the Rutim banquet," Asuta responded with a truly joyful grin.

As she placed her hand to her rapidly beating heart, Toor Deen took a seat.

It was already getting dark in the room, so Ai Fa went around and lit some candles, while Asuta clapped his hands together and offered thanks.

"We give thanks for the blessings of the forest, and offer our gratitude to Toor Deen, who manned the flame and gave us our life for this night... Thanks for the food." With that, Asuta started off by reaching for the giba offal soup. "Ooh, so you used entrails in a tarapa stew? Looks tasty."

Toor Deen clenched her fists and watched intently as Asuta brought the wooden spoon to his mouth. And then, his eyes opened wide, looking a little shocked.

“Those chitt seeds add just the right amount of punch. And this flavor...did you use lilo leaves?”

“Yes, that’s correct...”

“The lilo definitely pairs well with the tarapa, doesn’t it? It’s very tasty.”

Asuta was kind by nature, though, so that comment alone wasn’t enough to put Toor Deen at ease.

Meanwhile, Ai Fa slurped some soup with a frown.

“Ooh, so this is the heart, and this is skirt steak? It sure is nice getting to enjoy all these different textures, isn’t it, Ai Fa?”

“Indeed. And the proportion of chitt seeds used seems just right.”

“You sure are particular about chitt seeds, aren’t you? But I haven’t burned your mouth with them even once since then, have I?”

“Don’t make me remember! My tongue will start throbbing!” Ai Fa shouted with a frightening look. Still, considering how calm and composed she normally was, such an outburst of emotion really went to show just how much she had opened her heart to Asuta.

“Umm...are there any issues with how it tastes?”

“No, it’s delicious! It should make even folks eating offal for the first time more than happy,” Asuta replied as he scooped up a meatball. “Yup, no issues with these either. So you went with a no-frills fruit wine base for the sauce?”

Occasionally, Asuta used words that Toor Deen didn’t really get, which she figured must have come from his home country.

But at any rate, after that Asuta and Ai Fa feasted away just as vigorously as the Deen men did. They both had formidable appetites considering how thin they were. Toor Deen had actually been worried she had made a bit too much, but sure enough, everything ended up in their bellies.

“How was it...? I would like to hear your honest opinions on whether or not it was a meal fitting for a banquet,” Toor Deen questioned after somehow managing to finish off her own plate.

“Thanks for the meal,” Asuta stated in what seemed to be some unfamiliar chant, and then he crossed his arms and went, “Hmm... There was no issue at all with the flavor. To be perfectly honest, I never imagined you had polished your skills this much. After all, I haven’t really had a proper chance to give lessons to the members of the Deen and Fou clans.”

Even before he was kidnapped by that noble girl, Asuta had frequently stayed at the Ruu settlement, where he had apparently prepared food for the stalls and cooked dinner along with the women there.

On the other hand, Toor Deen and everyone else had only been able to get in a little training here and there by visiting the Fa house. Since it was the custom at the forest’s edge that you needed to prepare dinner for your house at your own stove, they had no choice but to bring the techniques learned from Asuta back home and try them out there.

“On top of that, it may be forward of me to say so, but I have some advice.”

“R-Right! Please, don’t hold back!”

“First off, you said before that you’d be offering grilled meat in addition to these dishes, but what about the soup?”

“The soup? I hadn’t come up with anything besides this tarapa dish...”

“I see. For the Rutim banquet I also prepared a tarapa stew, but that took a lot of time to prepare and plenty of ingredients, so I made a normal soup too,” Asuta stated, stroking his chin as he looked deep in thought. “This tarapa and offal soup feels pretty similar, I’d say. How many people will be attending the banquet?”

“R-Right, it should be around seventy or eighty, I believe.”

“It’ll be real tough preparing enough innards, then. The Deen clan is on a break, so who will be providing those and the meat?”

“Well, the plan is to have the Deen men go around to our related clans during the break period to teach them how to bloodlet and remove the innards. It should be clans that are closer than the ones up north, though.”

“I see. Well, even if you can get enough, I’d still say there’s no harm in

preparing a normal soup too. A simple dish like that can help the flavors of everything else stand out, and soup can efficiently provide a nice helping of vegetables, so I'd recommend using plenty of aria and the like."

"Right, got it."

"And also...this is really getting nitpicky, but it might be good to mix in some poitan or fuwano flour with the sauce you drizzle over the meatballs. That should help it cling better to them."

"Poitan or fuwano flour? Understood," Toor Deen replied, carving Asuta's words firmly into the back of her mind.

And as she did that, Asuta shot her a smile.

"Right, that's all I have to say."

"Huh?"

"I know you're trying to avoid using unnecessary ingredients as much as possible with the meatballs, so it's no big deal if you don't do so. Just adding the simple soup dish should be plenty."

"B-But isn't anything else wrong...? Not just with the contents of the dishes, but with the flavoring and everything...?"

"Like I said before, there's nothing wrong with the flavor. At present, I figure it's worthy of a perfect score, right?" Asuta asked, shooting Ai Fa a questioning look.

"Indeed," she nodded back. "I find these dishes even more delicious than what was presented at the Rutim banquet or the clan head meeting. It truly is surprising that you were able to prepare something on this level without Asuta's assistance."

"That's right. You may not quite be at Reina Ruu's current skill level, but considering how little instruction you received, this is a tremendous result."

"Then... Then if I receive more of your instruction too, can I get even better?" Toor Deen asked, leaning forward without even thinking.

Asuta's eyes opened wide in shock as he answered, "Y-Yeah, of course. You're still only ten years old, so you should have plenty of room left to grow."

“In that case... I really would like to learn more from you.”

She hadn't planned on revealing that to Asuta until after the banquet. However, she simply hadn't been able to hold in how she was feeling.

“You heard from Gulaf Zaza too, right, Asuta? My clan member Jas Deen asked him if the Deen clan could also help out with your business in the post town. If this banquet satisfies Gulaf Zaza, he should grant that request... Or at least, that's what Jas Deen said.”

“Yeah, I've heard. There was no time to discuss stuff like that until everything was settled with the nobles... But now that things have settled down, Gulaf Zaza is finally getting up off his backside, huh?”

“Yes... And Jas Deen said that's why I'm being placed in charge of this banquet.”

“Huh? You're only ten, but you're being put in charge of the chefs?”

“That's right. So if I can properly show the strength you bring to our people, then Gulaf Zaza and the clan heads under him should give their permission for me to help you out... Jas Deen said that if I want something, then I should be the one to see it through.” Suddenly, Toor Deen realized her body had started trembling. She clutched her knees to still herself. “So you see...if I really am successful with this job, then could...could I help out with your work too...?”

“Yeah, of course, Toor Deen,” Asuta replied with a gentle smile but a serious tone. “The truth is, we were actually just talking about expanding our staff. We're already borrowing lots of folks from the Ruu and Rutim, and the Fou and Ran don't have women to spare, so it's been looking like our only options would be the Lea and the Min. But if you can join in, that'd be a huge help.”

“Really...?”

“Yeah. So make sure to give this banquet everything you've got, okay?”

Toor Deen felt like she was about to break down in tears.

And yet, this was no time for crying. After all, she still had work to do.

If she could manage to make the banquet a success, she could help Asuta with his stalls... And if that happened, then it would probably be okay for her to cry a

bit.

With such thoughts running through her head, Toor Deen replied, “Thank you.”

At that, Asuta and Ai Fa both stared back at the young chef with more warmth than ever before.

Chapter 3: The White King of Morga

1

“Hmm...looks like we’re in quite a pinch,” Dan Rutim grumbled as he slowly sat up.

It was nearing evening, and he was currently in the depths of the forest. There was sand mixed with stone at his feet, and to his right he could hear water flowing. It seemed he was on the bank of some river whose name he didn’t even know.

When he turned to look behind him, he found the dark green thicket towering high. And though it was hard to make out through the foliage, there was a cliff face hidden behind.

As they plunged forward through that vegetation, Dan Rutim and the hunter with him had fallen down to this riverbank. And when that happened the branches must have cut into him, since his face and arms were stinging all over. Still, he at least didn’t seem to have suffered any permanent injuries to his fingers or eyes.

“Hey, Deem Rutim, are you all right? Let me know if you’re still alive,” Dan Rutim called out to the boy in his arms after taking in his surroundings.

In response, the youth with long blackish-brown hair painfully groaned, “Uugh...”

“Looks like you’re still with me for now at least, eh? I’m going to lay you down now,” Dan Rutim stated, placing the boy on the ground.

Instantly, Deem Rutim’s pained groaning started up again.

“Don’t flail about. You may have broken a couple ribs. And if you move more than you have to, broken ribs could end up damaging something inside.”

“Clan head... Dan Rutim...” the boy called out, looking up at the older hunter with listless eyes. “I’m sorry... This is all because I was so foolish...”

“Don’t worry about it. It’s my job to lead you properly, after all. So this screwup is all my responsibility,” Dan Rutim replied, only for tears to well up in the youth’s eyes.

“I’m so, so sorry... If anything happens to you, I won’t be able to face everyone in the Rutim clan...”

“I’m telling you, that’s my line. So I’m begging you, don’t go dying before me, all right?”

Deem Rutim was a hunter in training who had only just turned thirteen. And so, Dan Rutim had been showing him the ropes.

Currently, the Rutim settlement had just entered into a break period. The giba had eaten up the bounty of the forest nearby and wouldn’t come near the area for some time, so the Rutim hunters had been setting out traps deep in the forest, around the limits of where they could return from before it got too dark. And today, they had split up to check whether or not any giba had fallen for any of the previous day’s traps.

Sure enough, they had found one such giba caught in a trap. It was an old giba, and it had been large yet also very skinny. Its pelt was worn out, and its two horns had even broken off. That aged giba was dangling from a high tree branch, its back left leg caught in a vine trap.

“That giba looks totally helpless. I bet I could finish it off on my own, don’t you think?” Deem Rutim had said as he stood up from the shadow of the thicket.

However, Dan Rutim grabbed the boy’s arm from the side. “No, that giba is dangerous. We didn’t bring along bows, so let’s join up with Gazraan’s group first and then come back.”

“But why? That giba’s so weak that we shouldn’t need any bows. We can take care of things just fine by just slicing its throat with a blade.”

“I’m telling you, hold on. Giba on the verge of death can sometimes show unbelievable strength. And that giba was caught in the trap while it was starving, so it looks to be on edge.”

“How do you figure? It’s not even moving, almost like it’s already dead.”

“It’s currently saving up its strength. I know because of the smell.”

“The smell...?”

“Yup. When giba are mad, they give off a faint bittersweet scent. If it sees a human now, the last of its strength could come bursting forth in a torrent of rage,” Dan Rutim explained.

However, Deem Rutim shook his head, “I’m not convinced. I may be a kid new to the forest, but there’s no need to be so overly cautious. I mean, I’ve trained as a hunter too.”

“What I’m telling you goes the same for any hunter, no matter how experienced. I’m not belittling your strength.”

“In that case...if I finish off that giba, could I have its tusks and pelt for my house? It may be missing its horns, and the pelt is all worn out, but, well, that seems about right for my first prey.”

There was a youthful, reckless look shining away in the boy’s eyes.

However, Dan Rutim just tilted his head and went, “Hmm?”

“In the Ruu settlement, you get to keep the tusks and pelts you earn, right? Strong hunters earn a great fortune while weak ones suffer in poverty. I figure that harsh lifestyle has proven a strength for the Ruu clan.”

“I’m not so sure about that. It’s normal at the forest’s edge to share wealth equally between relatives. I think it’s just the Ruu and the northern clans who do otherwise.”

“By the northern clans, you mean the Zaza, Jeen, and Dom, right? They’re just as tremendously strong as the Ruu, aren’t they? And our Rutim clan has just as many hunters as they do, so we should be able to become a whole lot stronger...”

“That may be so, but it also may not be. For now, I’ve got no intentions of changing the customs of the Rutim,” Dan Rutim said with a chuckle, patting the boy lightly on the head. “But, well, if that’s how you feel, then you should try talking to Gazraan about it sometime. It’s you young folks who are in charge of the Rutim’s future, after all. I look forward to seeing where you all lead us after

I step down as clan head.”

“In that case...please just stay there and watch,” Deem Rutim declared, and then he turned around and leapt out of the thicket.

Dan Rutim was taken completely off guard, allowing a gap to form between them before he could start to chase after Deem Rutim.

“You fool! Don’t go near that giba!”

Dan Rutim was the quickest in all of the Rutim settlement. And so, he was able to grab hold of Deem Rutim’s shoulder before the boy made it ten steps...but that was too late. The moment the giba saw the young hunter, it started wildly thrashing, and that movement caused the branch the vine hung from to snap.

“Aah!” Deem Rutim shouted, petrified. In the same instant, the giba charged, dragging the branch and vine behind it.

The beast’s massive head sank into the young hunter’s chest. If the giba still had horns, that single blow would have surely killed him. As it was, though, Dan Rutim stood prepared and caught Deem Rutim’s body from directly behind.

“Hmm, looks like my only choice is to run.”

And so, without the slightest hesitation, Dan Rutim turned his back to the giba while cradling the boy in his arms.

If he could flee into a tight space, the beast wouldn’t be able to follow. With that thought in mind, Dan Rutim plunged into the thicket...but he rarely ever set foot this deep into the forest. Soon he came to a place he didn’t recognize at all as he fled, still hearing the giba’s footsteps approaching from behind, only to fall from that concealed cliff.

“What a foolish mistake. I’ll never be able to apologize enough for needlessly exposing you to such danger,” Dan Rutim lamented as he placed his hand on the head of the boy lying in the sand. And before long, tears started streaming from Deem Rutim’s eyes.

“Why should you have to apologize, Dan Rutim...? It’s my thoughtless actions that got us into this mess, right...?”

“And like I told you, it’s my role to lead novices like you properly. My precursors were able to do that for me, but it looks like I turned into a real screwup...”

There was a large river flowing to their right. And beyond that, an even thicker forest than the thicket behind them: Mount Morga.

Yes, it was Mount Morga, where no one was permitted to set foot.

The Rutim settlement was located rather far south along the forest’s edge, but just from a half day’s walk, they had come this close to the mountain.

Still, even though the people of the forest’s edge had been permitted to live in this area, they were forbidden from setting foot on Mount Morga. If they were to disturb the mountain, a calamity could bring about Genos’s downfall. That was the legend that had been passed down in this land.

On top of that, beasts even more frightening than giba lived on Mount Morga. That sacred mountain was protected by three types of beasts: the giant madarama snakes, red savages, and varb wolves.

The tale went that the giba were driven away by those beasts, all the way to the foot of the mountain. And now Dan Rutim had found himself in the predicament of having been chased to the outskirts of that forest.

Hmm... This is quite the dangerous situation, he thought to himself, looking down at his own body.

He was seated with both legs stretched out over the sand. And currently, he had a great sense of unease about his right ankle.

More than hurting, it felt hot. Nothing seemed strange about it at a glance, but it was possible the bone was dislocated.

My father Raa said that if I didn’t handle stuff like this properly, it could lead to the bone breaking or the muscles tearing. And that I absolutely shouldn’t go putting weight on it until the bone is back in place.

On top of that, Deem Rutim seemed to have broken several ribs. And so, neither of them could properly walk.

Their surroundings were starting to descend into twilight, and the wind was

beginning to feel chilly. If they couldn't make themselves able to set out right away, it would be difficult to make it back to the settlement before sunset.

This may well be the day my soul returns to the forest, Dan Rutim quite casually thought to himself.

Perhaps when that giba attacked, he should have cast Deem Rutim's body aside and drawn his sword. It was easy for a hunter to have their soul return to the forest over a single mistake in judgment like that.

Still, I really did wrong by Deem Rutim.

Dan Rutim had five children, and aside from his youngest daughter Morun Rutim, they had all been married. His oldest son Gazraan Rutim had grown into a splendid hunter, and he would surely be capable of guiding the Rutim as soon as it was needed.

But Deem Rutim still had his whole life ahead of him. It would be an unbearable shame for his life to end here and now. There was no way a thirteen-year-old still in training would be prepared to die out in the forest.

In that case, I've got to give whatever it takes to protect him. I guess I should prepare a fire to make it through the night? Dan Rutim thought as he tried to stand.

And it was at that very moment that a figure casually appeared.

Dan Rutim's eyes opened wide as he froze in a half-risen position.

"Could you...possibly be the same one from back then?" the man called out, clearly shocked.

The figure that had drifted in like some sort of illusion just quietly stared at Dan Rutim, eyes sparkling with a look of intelligence.

2

It had been twenty-five years now since Dan Rutim had first met that figure... Back when he had finally been recognized as a proper hunter at the age of fifteen.

There was an incident that left him in an even worse state than he was now. Just like today, he had headed out deep into the forest, only to be attacked by a pack of starving giba and shoved off a cliff.

Dan Rutim just barely managed to survive that fall. However, a giba's horn had dug into his thigh, and he had lost a shocking amount of blood.

He had managed to tear off some of his clothing and tie it over the wound, but there was just no strength left in his body. And as he sat there at the bottom of that cliff, Dan Rutim leaned up against a tree and stared vacantly into the distance at the majesty of Morga.

Hmm... So this is the day my soul returns to the forest, eh? Dan Rutim thought to himself.

It was already getting dark out. And the two hunters who had been with him must have already died, while the other hunters scattered about wouldn't have time to search for him.

There was no way he could make it through the night in such a state. Eventually the carrion-eating mundt or giant giiz mice would be drawn by the scent of blood. In the state he was in, Dan Rutim didn't even have the strength needed to fend off threats of that level.

Aah, if only I could have left behind my blood as a part of the Rutim clan... That's the one regret I just can't wipe away...

Dan Rutim had taken a wife when he turned fifteen, a woman two years older than him from one of the branch houses. He had said for two years now that he would make her happy, and just last month they were finally married.

But now, would he never be able to embrace her again? If he died out in the forest, would his wife spend her days married to some other man? That thought was so frustrating that his eyes started tearing up. He raged at his own powerlessness to fulfill his promise to give her a good life.

It was then that a figure appeared to his right, not making so much as a sound.

And as he turned his blurry eyes to face that direction, Dan Rutim found something truly unbelievable.

“Wh-Who are you? Where in the world did you come from?”

The figure didn't respond, and just silently stared back at Dan Rutim. But that made sense, as it wasn't a human, but rather a wild beast with pure white fur and four sturdy legs.

It wasn't a giba, nor was it a mundt. No, it was a sort of beast that Dan Rutim had never seen before.

Its body seemed to be about as long as the still-growing hunter was tall. And the whole of that robust yet slim body was coated in pure white fur. It had a long neck, a snout, and large triangular ears that stood straight up. Honestly, it was so beautiful that it seemed somehow artificial.

The skin around its gleaming yellow eyes was black, and its four paws had claws that looked even sharper than a mundt's. The creature carried an aura of overwhelming vitality greater than those carrion-eaters, or even a giba's.

“Could you be one of those varb wolves I've heard tell of? I didn't think they were supposed to appear at the base of the mountain, but...”



The beast just quietly stared.

“What beautiful fur. I had heard varb wolves have grey pelts, but maybe they were wrong about that.”

Naturally, the beast offered no response. Still, there was such a look of intelligence shining in those yellow eyes that it seemed only reasonable to think it understood human speech.

As such thoughts passed through Dan Rutim’s mind, the beast started creeping closer, and so the hunter hurriedly held up his palm.

“Hold on! Are you hungry? Even if you are, I’d appreciate it if you would not eat me.”

Unsurprisingly, his words received no answer.

“It’s not like I’m begging for my life here. It’s just that they say if a varb wolf like you gets a taste for humans, you’ll keep on attacking them. So if you really are a varb wolf, then you’re the one creature out here that I can’t allow to eat me. It would be unbearable to think that my death would bring trouble to my comrades at the forest’s edge!”

His plea was only met with silence.

“I have my pride as a hunter and my steel blade. I may be injured, but I won’t go down to you so easily. And besides...somehow, I don’t want to fight to the death with you.”

The varb wolf tilted its head ever so slightly. That action almost made it seem like it was questioning Dan Rutim’s words.

“I beg of you! Your proper hunting grounds are on the other side of this river, deep in the forests of Mount Morga, aren’t they? We do not pillage those grounds, so won’t you please listen to my plea?”

And then...the white wolf turned away and left.

Dan Rutim breathed a sigh of relief, once again exhaustedly leaning his back up against the tree behind him. Speaking so loudly seemed to have drained quite a bit of what energy he had left.

What a curious creature... That mysterious look in its eyes almost made it seem like a human had taken the form of a beast.

That must have been why Dan Rutim had no desire to fight it to the death.

A hunter's blade was a weapon meant to be used on beasts. It was not something to ever be pointed at a human. And so, cutting down such a humanlike creature would likely feel just as sinful as cutting down a fellow man.

But then Dan Rutim felt something hot on his right cheek. His eyes shot open as he loudly shouted "Gyah!" without thinking.

The white wolf's long face was right there next to his own. The creature must have circled around to the thicket behind him and approached him from that side. It was holding some sort of scarlet fruit in its large mouth, and regarding the panicking man sitting on the ground with a luminous gaze.

"Wh-Wh-What is it? Do you still have something you want from me?" the hunter asked in a fluster, only for the fruit to drop down on his chest.

The fruit had a slightly grassy yet sweet smell, and looked quite tasty.

"A-Are you telling me to eat this? But my people are forbidden from eating the bounty of the forest."

As always, the wolf remained silent, the light in its eyes shining mysteriously. The creature's moist black nose was now so close that it felt as if it would touch Dan Rutim's face.

"If we did so, then more giba would grow hungry in turn. And then those starving giba would attack the fields of Genos, which is why we are strictly forbidden from eating such fruits."

After a moment, the white wolf once again picked up the fruit atop Dan Rutim's chest in its large mouth. A second later, the fruit was torn to pieces by the wolf's white fangs.

"Hmm, so just like with giba, you eat not only meat, but also fruit...? My apologies for having to reject your kindness," Dan Rutim murmured, though it seemed unbelievable to think his words were truly getting across.

With a rustling sound, the white wolf once again disappeared into the thicket

behind it.

“Aah, what a surprise. Still, is it really possible that a wild animal would help out an injured human...?” the hunter muttered to himself, once again leaning against the tree trunk.

Then, in no time at all, the white wolf once again returned. And now its bared fangs held a snake with scales that shined in a rainbow of colors, of all things. The trailing ends of the rainbow snake’s body had been looped around the white wolf’s long snout.

“Hmm... Apparently our elders ate snakes and lizards when they lived in the black forest of the south. But such snakes are also prey for the giba here at the forest’s edge, so we’re also forbidden from eating them.”

The white wolf stared at Dan Rutim for a moment, but fortunately didn’t drop the snake on his chest before once more returning into the thicket.

Still, that wolf ate snakes? Well, as long as they were like the one just now and didn’t have any venom, then it shouldn’t be an issue.

There isn’t any food here in the forest that we can have. The only thing us humans can eat is giba, after all.

The only exceptions were pico and lilo, which had strong scents. And then there were the inedible lana leaves and grigee fruit, and the romu leaves that were used to deal with fevers. And none of that would be any use to Dan Rutim now.

As such thoughts ran through his head, he sensed some sort of disturbance approaching from behind. Dan Rutim didn’t even have the strength left needed to rise to his feet, so he just gripped his blade’s handle, though the sensation in his fingers had dulled.

“Hmm?!”

A jumble of white and blackish-brown fell to the sand in front of his eyes.

It was the white wolf...and a giba.

On top of that, this was one of the giba that had attacked Dan Rutim’s group before. After all, the wound one of his comrades had slashed across its brow

was still clearly visible. And it was a big one, about the same size as the wolf but with a much thicker torso.

Currently, the white wolf's fangs were tearing into the giba's throat, causing the creature to bellow in anguish and rage. The giba had the advantage in weight, and not by a small margin, so it was surely stronger. But as its throat was being bitten, its horns and tusks couldn't reach the white wolf. Even as the beast flailed like mad, the wolf matched its movements so that its great strength was of no use.

With a tremendous bellow, the giba collapsed to the ground. And without a moment's delay, the white wolf held the giba's head down with its front paws and ripped out its throat. Just like that, a torrent of fresh red blood gushed forth and the giba stopped moving.

And now stained with its prey's blood, the white wolf turned to face Dan Rutim.

"What splendid skill. Your strength is even greater than I heard. I really am impressed, truly," Dan Rutim said with a grin, taking his hand off the blade at his hip. "That's your prey. Go ahead and eat as much as you please."

The wolf didn't show any reaction.

"What's the matter? You eat giba, don't you? From what I've heard, that's why they moved to the base of the mountain, out of fear of your kind."

The white wolf once again tilted its head a bit, then it turned once more to face the massive giba. Its fangs tore right into the beast's stomach.

"Oh? So you eat the entrails?"

The white wolf just kept on intently devouring the giba's innards.

The strong stench of blood made it to Dan Rutim's nostrils. And in the meantime, dusk finally fell over the world around him.

I guess everyone should be returning home to the settlement soon...

Dan Rutim was the oldest son of the main house, and he had no brothers. If he did indeed die out in the forest, either his younger sister would temporarily become clan head and take a husband, or the branch house with closest blood

ties would become the new main house.

My sister said she wanted to marry into the Lea clan, so I really did wrong by her.

Were his sister and wife crying now? What about his father, Raa Rutim? He wasn't the sort to cry in front of anyone, but he was surely just as deeply saddened.

Though Dan Rutim firmed up his resolve in the face of perishing out in the forest, he had no intention of giving up until he breathed his final breath... But eventually, his heart would also surely be crushed by grief.

Making peace with death and desiring to live on weren't purely in opposition to one another. In fact, a hunter who didn't value their life wasn't qualified to be a hunter at all. Wishing with all your heart to keep on living while accepting that one's life may end in the forest at any time as you tried to hunt down even one more giba... That was what it meant to be a hunter of the forest's edge.

So I won't fear death...but I'm still only fifteen! I only just married the woman I love, and I still haven't had any kids! O mother forest...if you can find it in your mercy, please grant me the strength needed to make it through this single night! Dan Rutim thought to himself as he felt the strength drain from his body.

With a sigh, Dan Rutim lamented how he could regain that lost strength if he could only have something to eat and a bit of rest.

It was then that the white wolf moved away from the giba. With a relaxed pace, the beast walked over to the river. And through hazy eyes, Dan Rutim's gaze followed as it went.

Just as the hunter wondered what it was doing, the white wolf splashed its upper body down into the river. Just like Dan Rutim had thought from hearing it, the river seemed to be flowing quite strongly. And it was somehow amusing, watching the beast's paws perilously holding on to the riverbank.

After a bit of that, the white wolf lifted its body up and shook the water off its head. Then, it approached Dan Rutim again.

"So you washed yourself off? You really are a clever one."

Having regained its natural pure-white appearance, the wolf laid down atop the sand, just far enough away that Dan Rutim's blade wouldn't reach. And then, its yellow eyes stared intently at the hunter.

As for Dan Rutim, his gaze turned away from the wolf and toward the giba. The creature's massive body was lying there atop the sand. And its torso looked to be nearly completely hollowed out. However, aside from that, the only other mark on it was the bite to its throat.

"Do you only eat the giba's innards? Well, I suppose you couldn't eat a whole beast even bigger than you on your own."

The wolf just stared.

"Night will fall soon. Then the mundt and giiz will gather, and all that will be left by morning will be the giba's bones."

Naturally, that comment earned no response.

"Would you mind sharing a bit of this meat with me before that happens?"

The white wolf quietly closed its eyes as it rested its head atop its folded front legs.

As he looked at that gentle face, Dan Rutim thought, *All right*, and worked up his nerve. He would keep on clinging to life until the bitter end. That was what Dan Rutim had resolved to do.

The thought of just casually welcoming death as the strength slowly drained from his body didn't fit with his temperament or what he had learned as a hunter of the forest's edge. And so, having made up his mind, Dan Rutim twisted his body and stuck his head into the thicket to his rear.

Since he lacked the strength needed to stand, he instead crawled into the foliage. Then he found the driest branches he could and tossed them out behind him.

There were only thin branches around, so he threw his weight into breaking off some of the branches around him till he had what he needed. Then once he had tossed all those out of the thicket, Dan Rutim mustered his strength and crawled back out atop the sand.

After gathering up all the scattered branches in one place, he gave a big sigh.

The wound on his leg was throbbing, and he somehow got the feeling that his body temperature was dropping. Had the heat been escaping from his body along with his blood? He could feel a cold sweat forming on his brow.

Even so, I'm still alive.

Dan Rutim dug his fingers into the sand to help him crawl over to the giba carcass.

After pulling out his knife, he thrust it in at the base of one of the giba's rear legs. The blade had quite a bit of trouble going in, so he pushed his hips up against the bottom of the handle and shoved it in using the whole weight of his body.

With that, he cut through the pelt and the meat, and separated the leg from the body. It was a fine chunk of meat, fatter yet shorter than Dan Rutim's own leg. And as he cradled it to his chest, he crawled back over to his previous position.

He had another huge task ahead of him at this point: Now, he had to cut off the pelt.

Though he considered cooking it up pelt and all, he didn't have the strength left in him to crawl to the river. And it would be just too dangerous to eat the giba's skin without washing it, considering it was impossible to know what sorts of poisonous plants it might have walked through.

Even if my strength runs out midway through, I won't be able to survive if I do not choose my actions wisely.

After rubbing his hazy eyes, Dan Rutim cut into the giba pelt while taking care not to injure his fingers. Normally this task would be no trouble at all, but it proved an incredible burden in his current state.

Still, he somehow managed to remove around half of the pelt, after which he sliced off a bit of the freshly exposed meat as thinly as he could manage. That was due to his fear of touching the meat with dirty fingers, and it was also incredibly difficult.

He then reached into his hunter's cloak and pulled out some skewers and small knives, using them to stab one slice of meat each and then planting them point-up in the ground. Once he had used up two skewers and three little blades, Dan Rutim returned his knife to its sheath.

Now, he just needed to prepare the fire.

Once again, he reached into his hunter's cloak, this time pulling out the lana leaves used for igniting flames.

It was then that he noticed the white wolf seated with its chin resting on its front legs as it stared at him.

"Yeah, it sure is a hassle, isn't it? Us humans need to do all this in order to eat giba meat. Our stomachs just aren't as hardy as yours. And I'm going to light a fire now, so will you be all right? Wild animals generally tend to avoid flames, from what I know."

The wolf just kept on staring.

"Well, knowing you, I figure you'll probably be fine."

Dan Rutim placed a lana leaf atop the stack of branches on the ground, then he swiftly ran the tip of a stick across its surface.

Instantly, the leaf ignited, and the branches below it caught fire as well. Still, perhaps unsurprisingly due to the fresh wood mixed in, it gave off a worrying sputtering sound as the black smoke started puffing upward.

"Hmm, looks a bit unreliable."

Dan Rutim took off his hunter's cloak and vest. Then he tore up that vest and threw it into the fire, at which point the blaze finally grew and ignited even the thicker fresh branches.

Once he saw that, he then moved the stabbed bits of meat over next to the fire.

As the red flames cooked the giba meat, an irresistible aroma filled the air.

When fat dripped off and hit the flames, they grew all the stronger.

Even though Dan Rutim hadn't really been sensing his hunger at all, his

stomach suddenly let out a gurgle.

“Hrmm, seems my body has finally decided it wants to live too.”

The red meat was grilling up brown, and the scent of it cooking alone was enough to fill the inside of Dan Rutim’s mouth with saliva. And by this point, his stomach was loudly crying out.

“Don’t be in such a rush. You don’t want me to go eating half-cooked meat and having to pay for it later, do you?” he asked his own stomach as he replaced his cloak over his bare skin.

Night was approaching, and so it was growing cold. And even more importantly, his own body had been losing heat. He had been growing stiff from chills far greater than a fire this size could do anything about.

Even so, I’m still alive.

While using the leftover scraps of cloth to protect his fingers, he grabbed hold of a hot metal skewer.

With all his strength, Dan Rutim bit into the slice of giba meat that was still dripping fat.

Right away, the strength of the giba and the vitality of the forest streamed into him.

The heat and flavor of the meat was positively stunning.

“Yup, this is delicious!”

The giba fat was juicy and sweet.

The meat was hard, and had a wild scent about it.

Still, this was nourishment for the people of the forest’s edge. It was the blessing granted to them by the forest. Though the townsfolk apparently called it inedible, it didn’t change the fact that it was tasty.

It was said that in the black forest of the south, his ancestors had eaten lizards and snakes. And apparently, they were ecstatic at being able to eat giba meat after moving to the settlement at the Morga forest’s edge.

That certainly made sense, though. After all, they were able to take the meat

of such fierce beasts into themselves. It might have been tough and smelly, but it was a source of strength. And Dan Rutim certainly didn't think you could serve as a hunter eating such weak meat as karon or kimyuus.

The first cuts of meat he had prepared vanished into his stomach in the blink of an eye. Before the flame grew weaker, Dan Rutim sliced off some more, repeating that three times before the fire sputtered out.

In the end, it seemed he had managed to eat around a fourth of that thick giba leg. He didn't have any aria or poitan, but he still got the feeling that he had managed to eat more than usual.

And on top of that incredibly satisfying sense of fullness, Dan Rutim also found himself assailed by a powerful exhaustion.

"Hmm...?"

His body started swaying back and forth, and he placed his hands on the ground.

Though his mind felt very satisfied, his body was sending him an urgent message.

The blood suddenly drained from his head, and his surroundings instantly went dark.

His body seemed to be demanding that now that he had eaten, he next needed to get a sufficient amount of sleep.

"I mean, I get that that's my only option for getting my strength back. But this is right smack in the middle of the forest."

Night would soon be falling. If he fell asleep without first preparing a proper fire, then he wouldn't likely be waking up again. Mundt and giiz were always hungry, and though it wasn't common, a truly starving giba would even eat a human. So if a human like Dan Rutim took a defenseless nap out in the forest, his body would inevitably become a nighttime meal.

"If I could at least climb high up in a tree, then the giba and mundt wouldn't be able to get at me."

If he only had to deal with giiz biting him, it would be possible to survive. But

a place like this just wouldn't do.

With his hands still touching the ground, Dan Rutim fought back as hard as he could against the lethargy washing over him.

If he let his guard down, he could end up slipping into sleep at any moment.

The world around him was swaying, and the sound of the steadily flowing river was growing distant bit by bit.

The faces of his beloved wife and family floated into and out of his mind in a jumble.

Mother forest, grant me strength...! he desperately thought as he sat up.

And when he did, he found the white wolf before his eyes, baring its fangs.

What's this? Did you intend on eating me after I fattened up?

The beast's fangs clamped down on Dan Rutim's right shoulder, and he could feel that overwhelming strength even through his hunter's cloak.

Hey, cut it out...! he desperately thought, but his voice wouldn't come out, and his body refused to move.

Then, Dan Rutim's frame was easily lifted into the air.

That truly was some unbelievably monstrous strength, even if Dan Rutim still wasn't especially large for a hunter.

And then...he fell atop something soft.

Hmm...?

His vision was dyed white, and he felt warm fur up against his bare chest.

Apparently, he was now draped over the white wolf's back. And sure enough, the pressure on his shoulder had also disappeared at some point.

"What...? What do you intend to do with me...?" Dan Rutim questioned in a hoarse voice.

And instantly, the world around him started swaying. The white wolf was going somewhere with him on its back.

Instinctively, Dan Rutim clung to the white wolf's neck. The wolf let out a

reproachful growl in response, but it didn't stop moving. Meanwhile, he could feel his dangling feet dragging along in the sand.

What exactly are you...?

Suddenly, the white wolf leapt, and Dan Rutim clung desperately to its body as the leaves and branches of the surrounding foliage grazed his limbs and back.

Then, before he noticed it, he found himself awash in silence.

His sense of time was fading away, and it was possible he had lost consciousness more than once along the way.

But even so, Dan Rutim's arms were still wrapped firmly around the white wolf's neck, and the warmth from the beast warmed his chilled body.

"Where is this...?" the hunter questioned, looking up and glancing around.

Dark green leaves blocked his view, but through them he could spot the sky, dyed indigo blue.

They were up in an unbelievably massive tree, in a space between the trunk and a branch. Well, even if he thought of it as a branch, it was even thicker than his torso. The one he was on was so thick it would probably take ten people holding hands to wrap around it.

"What is this place...? How did you climb all the way up here?" Dan Rutim asked, though he naturally received no response. The wolf just gave an annoyed-looking shake of its head. And so, the hunter got down from the beast's back and carefully seated himself atop the branch.

The white wolf had settled down by the trunk, where there was a bit of a flat hollow. There wouldn't be any risk of falling in a place like that.

Dan Rutim also moved over to that hollow, slipping a bit as he went. It was hard to tell for certain because the branches got in the way, but it seemed they were rather high up. At least there wasn't any concern of being attacked by giba or mundt.

"I really am astounded... Is this how you always go to sleep?" Dan Rutim questioned as he leaned up against the tree trunk.

The white wolf offered no response.

“But your normal habitat is up on Mount Morga. And up on the mountain, you’ve got beasts like giant madarama snakes and red savages, don’t you? They seem like they could climb up trees... Actually, I’d think it’s more likely that they’d hide up a tree out of fear of you varb wolves.”

Still, the wolf was silent.

“Have you ever heard of Morga’s three way deadlock? Varb wolves beat savages, savages beat giant madarama snakes, and madarama snakes beat varb wolves... I can’t see *you* losing to either of those other two, though.”

The white beast just kept staring at him.

“Well, I suppose I should rest at least a little to get my strength back. Still, maybe it’s the blood I’ve lost, but I feel like I’m freezing. I apologize for continuing to ask so much of you, but would you mind sharing a bit of your warmth?” Dan Rutim asked as he crawled over toward the white wolf.

The beast didn’t move in response, and so the hunter pressed his body up against its white fur. And soon, he was filled with a sense of security that made it feel as if he was being cradled by his own mother.

“Hrmm, what’s this...?”

As a powerful sleepiness once again assailed him, Dan Rutim groped around the white wolf’s neck. Wrapped around that thick neck was a complex weave of vines. He hadn’t noticed earlier because it was hidden under the beast’s fur, but it was a fine necklace, adorned here and there with berries and beautiful stones.

“Hmm... So is this why you weren’t afraid of blades and flames...?” Dan Rutim questioned as the drowsiness washed over him.

And so, that unusual day finally came to an end.

3

“Twenty-five years have passed since then. Are varb wolves that long-lived?” Dan Rutim asked as he looked at the gallant white figure before him. “You look a bit smaller than the last time we met. Maybe it would make sense to assume

that you're not that white wolf, but rather its child...or maybe you just look smaller because I've gotten so much bigger. It really is difficult to judge."

The beast made no sound.

"Still, there is one thing I understand. You have the same light in your eyes as the one I saw twenty-five years ago. So you must be either that same white wolf I met then or its child. I'm certain you're not entirely unrelated."

Still no response.

"With that in mind, there's just one thing I wish to say," Dan Rutim continued, and then he deeply bowed his head. "Thanks to the compassion of that white wolf back then, I am alive here and now. I wouldn't have survived without that beast's assistance. I am truly, deeply grateful for that fact."

The white wolf stared at him evenly.

"When I awoke the following morning, you...or perhaps your parent, had vanished like some sort of illusion. In the end, I was unable to offer my thanks. It makes me truly glad to be able to clear away my regret from that day," Dan Rutim told it with a grin.

The wolf's yellow eyes quietly shone in response.

"After that, I somehow managed to make it back to the settlement, dragging along my injured leg as I went. It made for quite a commotion, with my wife and little sister sobbing like babies! No one really believed me when I told them of you, but I owe you my life. Please, allow me to offer you my continued thanks."

There was no change in the wolf's expression.

"Thanks to you, I was able to live a truly fulfilling life. Sadly I lost my wife when she was still young, but we were still able to have five whole children! It really, truly was a happy life."

The white wolf tilted its head questioningly.

And it was then that Deem Rutim spoke out weakly from next to him. "Clan head...Dan Rutim...who exactly are you talking to...?"

Dan Rutim looked back and forth between the boy's pale face and the white wolf. And then, he gave a slow nod.

“Right. Just now I was talking as if I had given up on living. But even if I’ve lived a fulfilling life, it’s not as if I’m fully satisfied just yet. I want to fill myself up with more and more satisfaction, to the point that it causes me to burst! I must overcome this hardship as well, no matter what it takes.”

The wolf quietly looked at the hunter.

“There’s no need to bother preparing a fire. Thanks to you, I remembered the proper path forward. At times like this, you should climb high into a tree and spend the night there,” Dan Rutim stated as he reached into his hunter’s cloak.

Then, he pulled out a bundle of jerky wrapped in a suurub leaf.

“Ever since that day, I always walk around with extra jerky! So if we can just secure a safe place to sleep, we should be able to survive! And this time around I just seem to have dislocated my ankle, so it’s not like I won’t be able to sleep. We just need to get back to the settlement at dawn, when the giba are sleeping.”

The wolf naturally remained silent.

“I’ll protect this injured comrade of mine through the night. Just like you did for me back then...” Dan Rutim then undid the binding on the suurub and tossed the contents to the white wolf. “Go ahead and eat that. I’ve still got jerky to spare, so there’s no need to hold back. It may have a little too much salt, so I don’t know if it’ll be to your taste, but I want to do whatever little I can to thank you for that night.”

After staring at Dan Rutim’s face for a bit, the white wolf bit down on the jerky at its feet.

Satisfied with that, the hunter then looked down at Deem Rutim’s face.

“Deem Rutim, it would be difficult to make it back to the settlement before the sun sets with the state we’re in, so I was thinking we’d spend the night out in the forest. Could I ask you to entrust me with your life?”

“Yes... I trust you, Dan Rutim...”

“All right,” the older hunter said as he picked up the boy as slowly and carefully as he could manage.

Deem Rutim then clung to Dan Rutim's neck, holding back his pained groans as best he could.

"Hold on tight. First off, I've got to climb up the cliff."

"Right..."

Dan Rutim then slowly rose, cradling the boy's body with one arm. Instantly, there was a painful heat in his right ankle.

Still, this was nothing compared to what he remembered of twenty-five years ago.

"Well then, I wish you good health. And I look forward to the day we meet again, white wolf."

Sure enough, there was an intelligent light shining in the white wolf's eyes.

After shooting the beast a smile, Dan Rutim looked upward.

There was a large cliff in front of him and his surroundings were starting to descend into darkness, but he wasn't worried at all.

He would live on and return to his comrades.

Everything came down to the forest's guidance.

And so, as the white wolf watched, Dan Rutim took his first step back toward a truly satisfying life.

Afterword

You have my deepest thanks for picking up this book, the fourteenth volume of *Cooking with Wild Game*.

If you looked at the table of contents then you must already be aware, but the composition of this volume is a bit different than usual. The back portion compiles something called the Group Performance. In other words, it is a collection of bonus chapters written from the perspective of characters other than Asuta.

Unlike with the usual Intermezzo or Aperitif chapters though, these ones are significantly related to the contents of the main story. If I had to say, I would explain it as them being a portion of the main chapters, just from a different point of view.

As to how things ended up this way, when this portion of the web version was being published, the majority of the new chapters were considered bonus stories. Having finally finished the long Cyclopeus arc, I wanted to try writing some sections like this for a little while before beginning a new part of the story.

With that in mind, this volume would have been almost entirely bonus stories, but for a variety of reasons I also wanted to begin the new arc right away, which is how I ended up with this composition of continuing both simultaneously.

On top of that, this Group Performance section ended up being quite long. All together it totals up to thirteen stories, which would be enough text for 1.6 volumes.

In terms of the contents, the core ended up being about the period of time not written about in the main story.

In the story itself, around a month and a half passes between last volume's epilogue and the prologue this time around, so it's a variety of stories told from

the perspectives of other characters during that blank period.

However, a number of other stories outside of those were also included. For example, the story *The Youngest Ruu Son's Little Adventure* takes place just before the last volume's epilogue.

On top of that, this time the newly commissioned text also took a different form than usual.

Generally, the extra stuff I write for the light novel version takes the form of Intermezzos written from the perspective of characters other than Asuta, but this volume was full of content like that already. If the new part of the story was more of the same, then the main body of the novel would have been a little too thin, so this time I added something to the core part of the story instead.

Chapter 2: Woven Bonds from the main story was entirely new content. Since there was a one-day gap between chapters one and three in the web version, I went ahead and inserted a new story into that gap. In terms of size, I believe it amounted to around thirty-eight pages.

At any rate, I was thinking of using the same structure for the next volume, and then inserting the remaining Group Performance chapters where appropriate after that.

Included among them are some that don't have much to do with the main story's contents, so I hope you'll look forward to those like normal bonus chapters.

I ended up spending this whole afterword explaining the Group Performance... I believe that the first volumes of the manga version should also be on sale alongside this release. I would be truly glad if you all look forward to that version, which is also handled by this work's illustrator, Kochimo.

As always, let me finish by giving thanks to my editor at Hobby Japan, my illustrator Kochimo, everyone else involved with the production of this book, and of course all of you who purchased it.

I hope to see you all again with the next volume!

April 2018,



Bonus Short Story

Early Afternoon in the Post Town

“So how many people are in your family, Tara?” Rimee Ruu asked.

“Hmm?” Tara responded with an adorable tilt of her head. “Umm, there’s my dad and mom, my two big brothers, my grandma, and my great uncle too! And me! So, seven!”

“What’s a great uncle?”

“He’s my grandpa’s younger brother! All the rest of his family is gone, so he lives with us.”

“I see... Well, even at the forest’s edge, people will live with other relatives when they don’t have much family to count on.”

“Oh, really?”

As I listened to that frivolous conversation between the young girls in the early afternoon in the post town, I felt a gentle calm washing over me.

Rimee Ruu and I were both manning the stalls at the moment, but there was currently a break in customers. Lately, whenever Tara happened to stop by at a time like this, she would spend some time hanging around with Rimee Ruu and building their friendship.

“Rimee Ruu, how many people are in your house?”

“There are thirteen of us! Kota’s still real little, though.”

“Thirteen? That’s amazing! How are there so many of you?”

“Hmm? Well, there are seven of us siblings, and then the baby, Kota! That’s my brother Jiza’s baby with Sati Lea!”

“Wow, that’s amazing! So families at the forest’s edge are really big, huh?!” Tara exclaimed, and then she suddenly turned my way. “Isn’t that amazing?! I mean, thirteen people! Is your family really big too, Asuta?”

“No. The Fa house is just me and my clan head.”

“Huh?! Your clan head is that lady, right? You don’t have a mom and a dad?”

“No. My clan head’s parents passed away when she was still young. As for me... My old man’s still back in my home country.”

Though I felt a dull pain deep in my heart, I shot Tara a smile so that she wouldn’t worry.

Even so, Tara’s brows drooped as she said, “Oh...”

“It’s fine. Even with just the two of us, each day is still a whole lot of fun. It’s really not sad at all.”

“Ah, right! If you have a baby then your family would grow!”

“A-A baby?”

“Yeah! You and your clan head could have a baby!”

Taken off guard, I could feel my face go red.

“U-Um Tara, it’s not like we’re married or anything, you know.”

“Really? But you’re gonna get married eventually, right?”

“Well, that’s a bit of a...precarious situation...”

“What’s ‘precarious’ mean?”

I could feel my own eyes wandering about, trying to escape Tara’s pure, innocent gaze. However, they soon collided with a chilly glare from Yamiru Lea, who was also working today.

“You can look to me for help all you want, but if you think I can get you out of this, you are in for a disappointment.”

“Ah, no, that’s not...exactly what I was hoping for...”

“You can’t allow yourself to get so out of sorts over every little thing said by such a small child. Honestly, it’s embarrassing just to watch.”

And so my face remained beet red as I was denied any aid whatsoever. That was how we spent another peaceful afternoon in the post town.

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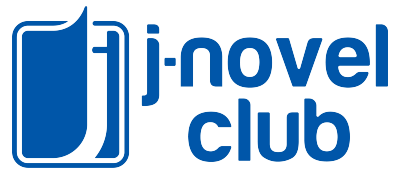
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Cooking with Wild Game: Volume 14

by EDA

Translated by Matthew Warner Edited by Adam Fogle

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